

English Literature and a Single European Currency

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“and that will make a hole in a sovereign”¹

NOTE: A version of this paper was first presented as the Inaugural Lecture of the Professor of English Literature at the University of Copenhagen, on 13 February 1996. At that time, Denmark and Britain had already negotiated a means of ‘opting out’ of the single European currency. Subsequently, in a referendum held on 28 September 2000, Denmark firmly rejected the euro. The topic of debate and unease has been the principle of sovereignty. Against European integration, the ‘ever closer union’, we still, in these northern lands, hear voiced the rhetoric of national sovereignty. And it may not be coincidental that the attachment to the national currency is strongest in countries where the coinage bears the image of the sovereign. Of all the Nordic nations, only the republic of Finland has exchanged its mark for the euro, without resistance or complaint. The three Nordic nations whose currency is the crown - Denmark, Norway, Sweden - remain, albeit on disparate trajectories, outside the European Monetary Union, as does sterling.

Sovereignty has much to do with sovereigns, with transcendental centres of authority, whose representation on the coinage gives a mystique, an aura, to our daily dealings; sovereignty guarantees, validates, underwrites the rituals of value and exchange. It thereby affirms and stabilizes value; all values in society are referred to that which is sovereign in it, that which is transcendent to the domain of exchange. That which subordinates and orders individuals, and shapes them into a society, is, we suppose, sovereign, and there is nothing that orders us more thoroughly than money. It has not been a choice presented even to the most individualistic, what sort of currency he or she may use. It is no more our choice to select our currency than it is to choose our

¹, said Farfrae, in Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, ch. XLV (1886); this particular phrase was added in the 1887 edition.

language. For language is also currency. Neither the language nor the currency can be tendered for privatization.

Yet, in the context of debates over sovereignty, the sense of the link between currency and language is not so much of their shared fluidity, liquidity, circulation, as of their shared monumentality. The Queen's English, the coin of the realm: these are the phrasal figures of sovereignty. Between the face value and the substance value of a coin is the relationship between monumentality and circulation. Words have their exchangeable value, of current usage, and their diachronic monumentality as exemplified in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. And their exchangeable value, as was first shown by Saussure and Jakobson, has nothing to do with essential or etymological meaning but only with phonetic differentiation: big is not pig is not fig: we may trace each of those words back to an earlier state, but what gives them their exchange value today is simply their phonemic difference from each other and from all other words.

Sovereigns as coins are tokens of exchange, of value for something else; yet the sovereign as image and superscription is a type of monumentality, unmoving, eternal, of inherent value, unexchangeable. There is value for exchange and there is absolute value. This contradiction is inherent in the structure of a coin - circular for circulation; but solid, *solidus*.² What is figured within the circle does not need a circular frame: the sovereign is more usually represented in a rectangular frame, and the rectangular is the geometry of the monumental. Pure circularity would be represented by a wheel, a hollow circle, an in-solidus, such as the 1, 2, and 5 crown coins in Denmark.³ The head of the crowned sovereign remains on the 10 and 20 crown coins, but has been replaced on the silver coins by three crowns and three Ms each with a subscript II

² 'solidus' is the 's' of the old notation of £.s.d. (libra, solidus, denarius), known 'in translation' as pounds, shillings and pence.

³ With an increasing disparity between the values of the Danish and Swedish crowns in the 1980s, it was necessary to make a clear distinction in the look and feel of the coinage. Necessary, that is, for the Danes, whose more valuable crown would suffer from confusion with the less valuable Swedish crown. So in 1992, to prevent mistakes, whether optically or haptically induced, the Danes put holes in their own crowns.

(for Queen Margrethe II), arranged alternately in a circle around the empty centre. The six elements of the circular pattern on the 'heads' side, the obverse, match the six elements of the Viking design on the reverse. (Interestingly, on the old unholed and 'solid' one crown coin, the Queen's head is without a crown, as if one crown were adequate, as ground, and that a figured crown would be redundant.) A Roman might wonder at one crown, two crowns and five crowns all being represented by three crowns; and he might ask how many sovereigns are taken to be represented by three initial Ms? The conflict between monumentality and circularity is akin to that known somewhat misleadingly as squaring the circle: anyone can contain a circle within a square, or a square within a circle. The real problem is to square the ring: the two cannot be reconciled. One cannot fit a crowned head, a sovereign, into or onto the rim of a wheel; instead one must resort to a repetitive design, of rotational symmetry. The current Danish coins are thus in their design similar to the EU flag, with, on a blue ground, its circle of stars (of indeterminate number, like those of the stars but not of the stripes on another flag).

These similarities may not be accidental. In traditional theories of semiotics we are accustomed to thinking in terms of the difference between figure and ground: figure is essential, valuable, significant - ground is none of those. Whether a text be written on paper, parchment or computer screen should make no difference at all to the meaning of that text, and value is all in the meaning. Since the invention of printing, when cheap costs of material and reproduction rendered the ground disposable, and printed paper money shocked by its felt lack of substance, only the coinage has preserved for us the sense that figure and ground may be intrinsically inseparable: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in an essay of the 1770s, 'On the Epigram,' argues that a coin is that in which the inscription and the inscribed are one. (Cited in Shell, 1982: 156; see Lock 1998) The metal ground is the 'anticipation' and the inscription is the 'resolution.' We may see in this theory of the epigram an anticipation of that which finds *its* resolution in Saussure's theory of the two-part sign, with its definitive

reconfiguring of the intelligible as a duplication of the sensible - in a linguistic sign, normatively, the visual and the phonetic.

Lessing's point is that there can be *no* substance value, or purely material value, in a coin. As long as there is sovereignty, it will be a criminal offence to melt down or de-face a coin of the realm. Nor can there be purely notional, conceptual, intelligible value in a coin. The inscription cannot be detached from its ground; nor, when the ground is pure silver or even gold, is it possible - constitutionally - to detach the ground from the figure, to erase the inscription.

Here is our paradox: one coin of one value is exactly like another, as good as any other, yet each coin is entirely coincidental with itself. Monumentality and circulation, essence and surface, meet in endless combat, in an inseparability that depends only on the idea of sovereignty.

A coin is good to hold (*drachma* means 'a handful of coins'), yet coins are not held and kept, unless by numismatists. A coin loses its function when it is collected; it is that which is always to be expended. It is so commonly - we might say, teleologically - expended that in England the most acceptable euphemism for urination is to spend a penny. What else might one spend? It is the most proper item of expenditure, even as nothing that is to be spent can have its propriety retained. What is expended is wasted, dross, spent. (We need not pursue the Freudian link between gold and faeces - except, parenthetically, to draw attention to that odd lexical pair: increment/ excrement.)

What is our sovereign's image doing on that which we appear to value so little, on coins on which we occupy our thoughts only in the determination of the manner in which we shall be rid of them? The sovereign circulates among her subjects. However much she is passed about, she remains within the orbit of her dominion. The territory of circulation is coterminous with that of her nation. Where I do not rule, the image declares, there I am worthless, the coin affirms.

The limits even of the 'universality' of the Roman empire are made clear by Christ's words about the tribute-money: 'And they

brought unto him a penny. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and this superscription? They say unto him, Caesar's. Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.' (Matt. 22:21; Mk. 12:13; Lk. 20:20) This has been interpreted by some to mean that the intelligible aspect of the coin, the inscription bearing his name and image, belongs to Caesar, while the materiality, the mineral creation, belongs to God. The figure would thus be earthly, but the ground is of transcendent origin. (Shell, 161, note) We may however suppose Jesus to be not less intelligent than Lessing: the Last Supper enacts and initiates the doctrine of the sign as sacrament, embodying the inalienable inseparable contract between figure and ground, sign and matter. There is no separating figure from ground, because there can be no figure without ground.

The first Christian Emperor, Constantine, was concerned that only his own image should be on the coinage, with the cross on the verso. In late 7th century Byzantium, however, during the reign of Justinian II, we find Christ depicted on the coinage, with the visual pun of the identifying halo coinciding with the rim of the coin, while the Emperor Justinian is depicted on what we must assume has now become the *verso*. Above the image of Christ the superscription reads 'Rex regnantium' - King of the Kingdom - while on the verso the superscription reads: 'Dominus Justinianus Servus Christi' - 'Lord Justinian, servant of Christ'. (Belting 1994: 135-38) This is problematic, because the image of Christ asserts a cosmic sovereignty - a truly universal empire, unlike the Roman - and therefore the universal validity of its coinage.

It is notable that such a rash practice should have begun precisely when the Eastern Roman Empire was feeling most acutely its limitations, against the new empire of Islam; and at about the time of the first Islamic edict against images in Christian churches within its territory, issued in 721. Yet we should not be entirely surprised, for sovereignty needs limits, and is content within them. When a coin reaches the border of the territory over which its graven image holds sovereignty, it must be exchanged not for a thing of inherent value - something else - but for something similar,

another coin, bearing another image, or, in Islam, an aniconic sign. The coin of the realm, by virtue of being valueless outside the realm, defines the pragmatic limits of the realm. Every exchange at the border, every negotiation of rates, is thus not a reduction but an affirmation of sovereignty.

The euro is posited on the assumption that future empires will be measured and determined by currencies, without - and this is the source of popular discontent - either the centralizing power or the restraining influence of sovereignty. If sovereignty is 'transferred to Brussels', as is so often threatened, then truly the new Europe will have been a failure: for its aim, the minimal condition for its success, must be a semiotic substitution for what is recognized (to adapt the role of metanarrative in Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*) as an absence, in all but signs, of sovereignty. The best-known and most easily-comprehended of those signs today is the constitutional fiction of the constitutional monarch.

The head of the sovereign, the crowned head, known synecdochically as the crown, is on the crowned coin, itself known in some nations as the crown. Before the invention of photography and television, it was above all the coinage that provided the image of the monarch. It is still, for us, on coins and (in Britain) on stamps, that we are most familiar with the image of the sovereign in our quotidian doings. Until the intrusive publicity of modern technology made invisibility unimaginable, the coin was the popular and almost the only image of the sovereign. This is marvellously caught in George Lamming's novel of a West Indian growing up in the 1930s, *In the Castle of my Skin*. Queen Victoria's birthday, May 24th, Empire Day, was celebrated in Barbados, and on that day each child was given a penny at school:

Most of the boys were busy examining the pennies....
The boys speculated whether it was possible to reproduce them.... Some argued quietly about the size of the king's face, and the way the face had been stamped on the copper. It was very clever, they thought. It was a real face, and the face they had

seen in other pictures. Some said it was really a photograph of the king stuck on to some kind of background and then coloured with copper. This face on the penny was very fascinating. Could you have a penny without a face? [Lessing's question of the epigram] How did the face get there? ... Some said it was a drawing of the king made with a pin while the copper was soft.... It was a long and patient undertaking. But it had to be done if there was going to be any money at all, and everyone knew how important money was. It was difficult but necessary. That was not feasible, some thought. In fact it was very silly to argue that such a job would be done by sensible people. And the English who were the only people in the world to deal with pennies were very sensible. You couldn't involve a king in all that nonsense of melting down copper and making a drawing. And how would he find the time to sit till all those million pennies were done? ... The face of the king was the same on every penny and in every detail.... Someone said it was the same penny all the time. One penny, that is the first penny ever made, was the real penny, and all the others were made by a kind of stamp. You simply had to get the first penny and the necessary materials and thousands followed. That meant, someone asked, that you couldn't spend the first penny. (Lamming 1987: 44-45)

This comes close to the mystery of sovereignty, for it identifies the unexpendable residue which guarantees the value of all that can be spent. The coinage must have a centre, a still unmoving point, transcendent to the order of circulation, a fixed source of value, an essence. But even this does not satisfy a colonial curiosity:

Someone wanted to know how that first penny was made.... That wasn't difficult, the boy explained. The penny was made as you saw it without the face of the king. It was heated by a special fire so that it would receive and keep the mark made on it. It was shaped and washed properly, and

finally sent to the king who pressed it on one side of his face. The picture came out as we saw it. That was why we saw one side only of the face. (Lamming: 45-46)

And then we get the most brilliant intervention in the debate:

But all the arguments for the stamp and the drawing were thrown overboard since one boy had it from good authority that the king was never seen.

Maybe as a baby and later as a boy. But when he became a king no one ever saw him. No one could see him. They had seen ... pictures of the king [in newsreels and photographs] taking the salute and inspecting the ranks ... That wasn't the king at all. It was the king's shadow. ... There was a shadow king who did whatever a king should do. It was the shadow king who went to parades, took the salute and did those things with which we associated the king. The shadow king was a part of the English tradition. The English, the boy said, were fond of shadows.... Somebody asked if you were ever talking to a real man or a shadow when you talked to an Englishman, and the boy said yes. (Lamming: 46-47)

Lamming's is a dazzling treatment of the various theories of representation; it appears to conclude, in agreement with the Emperor Constantine, that the source of value and sovereignty ought to be invisible, shadowed, shrouded in mystique, shimmering in an aura. (And where did we first see and not see a hologram, if not on a banknote or a credit card?)

If the value of coinage is to be derived from a wilful mystification of authority, an obsolete model of transcendence, reliant on what is now recognized as the fiction of sovereignty, what are we to do with language - the other side of this paper's coin?

It was once supposed that when we speak, our words and our language issued forth from our inmost being; just as language was supposed to be the defining attribute of man, so one's own language,

one's mother tongue, native speech, are taken, in these very metaphors, to be part of our organic constitution: my tongue is my tongue in English and in all the Romance languages (though not in the Germanic tongues). Language is of the essence, of our individual essence, our breath, our being. Such a view is articulated to the utmost tip of the tongue in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, when Mowbray is sentenced to banishment from England for life:

The language I have learnt these forty years,
My native English, now I must forego,
And now my tongue's use is to me no more
Than an unstringéd viol or a harp,
Or like a cunning instrument cased up –
Or being open, put into his hands
That knows no touch to tune the harmony.
Within my mouth you have engaoled my tongue,
Doubly portcullised with my teeth and lips,
And dull unfeeling barren ignorance
Is made my gaoler to attend on me.

(*Richard II*, I iii 159-69)⁴

Mowbray's anticipation of exile is matched in the next act by the news given to King Richard of the death of John of Gaunt, just after Gaunt has made one of the most famous speeches in all of English literature - at any rate the most English, and so presumably famous for being most English - a speech which Richard, happily for his conscience, has arrived too late to hear:

O, but they say the *tongues* of dying men
Enforce attention like deep harmony:
Where words are scarce they are seldom *spent* in vain,
For they breathe truth that breathe their words in vain.

(*Richard II*, II, i, 5-8)

⁴ The line 'doubly portcullised with my teeth and lips' is a lingual tour de force - the speaking of the line enacting the double and sequent closure of dentals and labials - whose only rival in English may be the opening apostrophe of Nabokov's *Lolita*.

The tongue is likened, in its 'deep harmony,' to a musical instrument, yet what is spoken is *spent*, like money. Previously Gaunt had challenged his son Bolingbroke: 'to what purpose dost thou hoard thy words?' Bolingbroke replies that he has 'too few' words to take his leave of his father, though 'the tongue's office should be prodigal': for words, like coins, exist only to be spent. (*Richard II*, I, iii, 253-56) When some time later Richard asks about Gaunt: 'What says he?' Northumberland replies:

Nay nothing, all is said;
His *tongue* is now a stringless instrument;
Words, life, and all, old Lancaster hath *spent*.
(*Richard II*, II, i, 148-50)

To which Richard's surviving uncle, Edmund Duke of York, adds:

Be York the next that must be bankrupt so!

York foresees that Gaunt's lands will be seized by Richard, and will not be inherited by his exiled son, Bolingbroke, the future Henry IV. Bankruptcy is thus at once a figure for death, exile, and silence. Gaunt's tongue, a stringless instrument, is like Mowbray's 'no more than an unstringed viol or a harp': for one whose life is his language, exile is death.

The play of words on and with coins is in Shakespeare endemic (to resort to a non-financial substitute for the more obvious 'interesting'): when Richard has handed over his crown to Bolingbroke, has been stripped of his kingship and of all his titles, he wonders 'if my word be sterling yet in England' (*Richard II*, IV, i, 264): England is the land whose limits contain both the King's English and the coin of the realm.⁵

⁵ It is, in the present context, worth noting that, according to *Klein's Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1971) 'sterling is not related to ME *sterre*, 'star' (as suggested by most lexicographers).' One lexicographer not in this matter to be faulted is H.C. Wyld, whose *Universal Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Routledge, 1932) makes no suggestion of stars, confesses that the origin of *sterling* is uncertain, but notes that it was 'in ME formerly supposed to be from Esterling, name given to traders of the Hanseatic League; in MHG *sterlinc* was the name of a coin.' To derive sterling from *Österling* is certainly tempting, on the littoral of Mare Balticum.

John of Gaunt's speech about the condition of England is so celebrated and familiar, much recited and institutionally transmitted, because it accords with a sovereign and monumental idea of nation and literature. But if we trace the coinage through both parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, we see strange things happening: a cycle which can be presented as an allegory of the way in which, in modern theoretical thinking, the diachronic study of solid monuments, visible signs of invisible essences, has been usurped by the synchronic fascination of structures, systems, liquidity, currency. (One may be a master - this, a monumental metaphor - of one's own language; but one is fluent only in another tongue.)

The Battle of Shrewsbury, fought between Henry IV and the rebels led by Northumberland and his son Hotspur, is won by somewhat dishonest means: a number of the King's supporters are dressed up as the King. The rebel Douglas kills Sir Walter Blunt in the belief that Blunt is the King. The stage direction (*Henry IV, Part One, V iii*) keeps the reader informed, and is trite in its explanation: 'Then enter Douglas and Sir Walter Blunt (disguised as the king) fighting.' The theatre audience is of course as much in the dark as Douglas, for we identify characters on stage precisely by their costumes, especially when they are wearing helmets. Douglas tells Hotspur of his great triumph, but Hotspur recognizes the face of Blunt:

Hotspur: This, Douglas? No, I know this face full well.
A gallant knight he was, his name was Blunt,
Semblably furnished like the king himself....
The king hath many marching in his coats.

Douglas: Now, by my sword, I will kill all his coats,
I'll murder all his wardrobe, piece by piece,
Until I meet the King.

(*Henry IV, Part One, V, iii, 19-28*)

In the next scene, on cue, Douglas does indeed encounter the King:

Another king! They grow like Hydra's heads.
I am *the* Douglas, fatal to all those

King: That wear those colours on them. What art thou,
 That *counterfeit'st* the person of a king?
 The King himself, who, Douglas, grieves at heart
 So many of his *shadows* thou hast met,
 And not the very King...

Douglas: I fear thou art another *counterfeit*.

(*Henry IV, Part One, V, iii, 35*)

And with that fear we switch from the theatrical figure, the wardrobe and the coats, to the metaphors of coinage, with, in 'counterfeit', the dishonesty registered by the verb 'to coin'. And Douglas misses the triumph of killing the real king, the true sovereign, not through the King's valour, but because of the arrival of Prince Hal.

Hal and Hotspur fight in single combat while Falstaff (who could hardly be disguised by any wardrobe) is attacked by Douglas and is seen to lie down on the stage. The stage direction reads: 'Douglas ... fighteth with Falstaff, who falls down as if he were dead.' The audience knows nothing of this for some thirty lines, while Hal kills Hotspur and sings his praises; Hal then sees Falstaff's body, speaks less fulsomely, and makes his exit, after which:

Falstaff (riseth up):

... 'Sblood, 'twas time to counterfeit, or that hot
termagant Scot had *paid* me [put paid to me],
scot and lot too. Counterfeit? I lie, I am no
counterfeit. To die is to be a counterfeit, for he is
but the counterfeit of a man, who hath not the
life of a man: but to counterfeit dying, when a
man thereby liveth, is to be no counterfeit but the
true and perfect image of life itself. ...[Falstaff
then sees Hotspur's corpse] How, if he should
counterfeit too, and rise? By my faith, I am afraid
that he would prove the better counterfeit.

(*Henry IV, Part One, V, iv, 110-124*)

What we see in this extraordinary, spectral battle is a transformation of figuration, from costume as identification to costume as deception, and from counterfeit as deception to counterfeit as coinage: true coining.

For what is Henry IV's army but a horde of coins, a conventional system whose elements are mistaken for autonomous persons, like the playing cards that Alice meets on the Queen's croquet ground?

Henry IV's trick of deception goes unpunished; the king suffers endless remorse for having usurped the throne from Richard II, but not for dishonourable practices in war. The Battle of Shrewsbury is a test of the currency of the king's image. The one who is punished is Falstaff, who did not pretend to be the king - clearly a dangerous and brave thing to do - but pretended not to be alive: for the better part of valour is discretion. When Hal, crowned Henry V, turns against Falstaff - 'for I have turned away my former self' - Falstaff can only say, 'Master Shallow, I owe you a thousand pounds,' the sum borrowed from Shallow, which would have been represented, returned with interest, in the recognition of the sovereign. Instead, the sovereign treats Falstaff as a counterfeit - a false coin.

From the monumentally centralized and hierarchical world of John of Gaunt's ideal, we move through figures of coinage and currency to a world of multiplicity and instability, and in *Henry V* to a play whose very text is linguistically jumbled, macaronic.

In the unity of the kingdom that fights against the French at Harfleur and Agincourt, we hear linguistic representations of varieties of English, from the Welsh accent of Fluellen to the Scottish accent of Jamy and the unascrivable - vaguely Irish - sounds of Macmorris (in the Folio their speeches are cued as 'Welsh,' 'Scottish,' 'Irish') whose accent accentuates his national problem:

What ish my nation? Ish a villain, and a bastard, and a knave, and a rascal -- What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation? (*Henry V*, III ii 125)

In Fluellen we hear exemplified the principle of semantic value inhering purely in phonetic differentiation. We hear him recall to Henry how the King's great-uncle, the Black Prince, 'fought a most prave pattle here in France' (*Henry V*, IV vii 100); but his linguistic freedoms go beyond plosive modification to a disrespect for proper names and consecrated titles:

- Fluellen: What call you the town's name where
Alexander the pig was born?
Gower: Alexander the Great.
Fluellen: Why, I pray you, is not pig great? The pig, or
the great, or the mighty, or the huge ... or the
magnanimous, are all one reckonings, save the
phrase is a little variatious.

(*Henry V*, IV, vii, 15-19)⁶

Problems of orthography and transcription are even more acute than elsewhere in Shakespeare, in these indications of irregular or non-standard pronunciation. But such dialogues are clear evidence of the recognition of varieties of spoken English, and of the possibility of the textual and theatrical representation of non-standard speech. And, in the same remarkable play, we find representation of non-native English in the language lesson given by Alice to the French princess Katharine:

- Katharine: Alice, tu as été en Angleterre, et tu bien parle le
langue.
Alice: Un peu, madame.
K: Je te prie, m'enseignez... Comment appelez-
vous la main en Anglais?
A: La main? Elle est appelée de hand.
K: De hand. Et les doigts?
A: Les doigts? Ma foi, j'oublie les doigts; mais je
me souviendrai. Les doigts? Je pense qu'ils sont
appelés de fingres: oui, de fingres....
K: Comment appelez-vous le col?
A: De nick, madame.
K: De nick. Et le menton?
A: De chin.
K: De sin. Le col, de nick. Le menton, de sin.

⁶ This is an instance of what Jean-Jacques Lecerle (Lecerle, 1990: 59) terms the 'remainder', that type of remainder that is visible when 'Great' as 'pig' or 'mighty' or 'huge' is seen slipping from proper to common noun.

A: Oui. Sauf votre honneur, en verité, vous prononcez les mots aussi droit que les natifs d'Angleterre.

(*Henry V*, III, iv, 1-39)

However, the lesson almost breaks down over an indelicate homophone, no less indelicate for being (robe/count) incorrect:

K: Comment appelez vous le pied et la robe?

A: Le foot, madame, et le count.

K: Le foot, et le count? O Seigneur Dieu! Ils sont les mots de son mauvais [son mot/son mau], corruptible, gros, et impudique, et non pour les dames d'honneur d'user: je ne voudrais prononcer ces mots devant les seigneurs de France pour tout le monde. Foh! Le foot et le count. Néanmoins, je réciterai une autre fois ma leçon ensemble....

(*Henry V*, III, iv, 49-58)

Here in this scene virtually unparalleled in English theatre, we see words as tokens of exchange: indeed we see the inadequacy of learning a foreign language as if each separate word had an equivalent unit of exchange. In Act IV scene iv we hear represented an encounter *between* languages, when Pistol arrests a French soldier, and 'Boy' interprets. Before the boy arrives, various terms uttered by the French soldier in his imprecations for mercy are understood by Pistol as English words of coinage, offers of a ransom, as in an echo poem:

Soldier: ... Ayey pitié de moi.

Pistol: Moy shall not serve, I will have forty moys....

Soldier: Est-il impossible d'échapper la force de ton bras?

Pistol: Brass, cur?

Thou damned and luxurious mountain goat,
Offer'st me brass?

Soldier: O pardonnez moi!

Pistol: Say'st thou me so? Is that a ton of moys?

And then the boy intervenes to interpret, and further confusions follow. Pistol tells the boy to tell the soldier in French that he means to cut his throat.

- Boy: ...ce soldat ici est disposé tout à cette heure de couper vôtre gorge.
- Pistol: Owy, cuppele gorge, permafoy, Peasant, unless thou give me crowns, brave crowns;
Or mangled shalt thou be by this my sword.
- Soldier: O je vous supplie pour l'amour de Dieu, me pardonner! Je suis le gentilhomme de bonne maison: gardez ma vie, et je vous donnerai deux cent écus.
- Pistol: What are his words?
- Boy: He prays you to save his life, he is a gentleman of a good house, and for his ransom he will give you two hundred crowns.
- Pistol: Tell him my fury shall abate, and I
The crowns will take....
- Boy: ... pour les écus que vous l'avez promis, il est content de vous donner la liberté.

(*Henry V*, IV, iv, 35-54)

The episode epitomizes the problem: how does one translate a unit of currency, not at the rate of exchange of value, but at the lexical exchange? Boy translates 'deux cent écus' as 'two hundred crowns'. The rate of economic exchange is, we may say, fluid and common; by contrast, the negotiation of nominal exchange must confront the proper, and the monumental. One crown may be worth one ecu, financially - as it were semantically - but one proper noun cannot translate, or be exchanged with, another proper noun.

Act V, the climax of the entire cycle that began with Mowbray's exile and John of Gaunt's dying words, yet for many readers a perplexing anticlimax, brings together French and English in a textual and linguistic alliance, the marriage of Henry and Katharine; we might term this macaronic, and punningly invoke the Greek

makari, for the blessed non-union of two languages. May all differents be blessed, and all homogenizings be cursed.

We last saw and heard Katharine at her language lesson with Alice. Now Henry is asking for her hand in marriage, and she responds:

K: Your majesty shall mock at me, I cannot speak your England.

H: O fair Katharine! if you will love me *soundly* with your French heart, I will be glad to hear you confess it brokenly with your English tongue. Do you like me, Kate?

K: Pardonnez-moi, I cannot tell vat is 'like me.'

H: An angel is like you, Kate, and you are like an angel.

K: (to Alice) Qui dit-il? que je suis semblable à un ange?

A: Oui, vraiment, sauf votre grace, ainsi dit-il.

H: I said so, dear Katharine, and I must not blush to affirm it.

K: O bon Dieu! Les langues des hommes sont pleines de tromperies.

H: (to Alice) What says she, fair one? That the tongues of men are full of deceits?

A: Oui, dat de tongues of de mans is be full of deceits: dat is de princess.

K: The princess is the better Englishwoman.... I am glad thou canst speak no better English; for if thou couldst, thou wouldst find me such a plain king that thou wouldst think that I had sold my farm to buy my crown.

(*Henry V*, V, ii, 102-126)

In this 'farm' we must hear an echo of John of Gaunt:

This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land,
Dear for her reputation throughout the world,
Is now leased out - I die pronouncing it -
Like to a tenement or pelting farm.

(*Richard II*, II, i, 56-60)

And the word *farm*, cognate with *firm*, *firma*, signifies a fixed sum payable at regular intervals, and also that which is leased out at a fixed rent. Thus that which is firm, a parcel of land, *terra firma*, has been exchanged for that which is infirm and unstable, a crown, whose rate is not fixed, and which might be taken for an *ecu*, which in turn might become a euro.

Later on in the same scene of courtship, Henry decides that he will speak French to Katherine, upon which she compliments him:

K: Sauf votre honneur, le Français que vous parlez,
 il est meilleur que l'Anglais le quel je parle.

H: No, faith, is't not, Kate: but thy speaking of my
 tongue, and I thine, most truly-falsely, must
 needs be granted to be much at one.

(*Henry V*, V, ii, 195-200)

Words and languages are now being exchanged and tested as coins.

H: How answer you, la plus belle Katharine du
 monde, mon très cher et devin déesse?

K: Your majesté 'ave fause French enough to deceive
 de most sage demoiselle dat is en France.

H: Now, fie upon my false French. By mine
 honour, in true English, I love thee, Kate....
 Come, your answer in broken music; for thy
 voice is music, and thy English broken: therefore,
 queen of all, Katharine, break thy mind to me in
 broken English; wilt thou have me?

K: Dat is as it shall please de roi mon père.

(*Henry V*, V, ii, 226-261)

There then follows a parody of the traditional exchange of kisses, for this is an 'exchange' of the French and English words for 'kiss':

H.: Upon that I kiss your hand, and I call you my
 queen.

K: Laissez, mon seigneur, laissez, laissez! Ma foi, je
 ne veux point que vous abaissiez [would lower

yourself: a poet's pun and a princess's
subjunctive] votre grandeur en baisant la main
d'une de votre seigneurie indigne serviteur...

H: Then I will kiss your lips, Kate.

K: Les dames et demoiselles, pour être baisées devant
leur noces, il n'est pas la coutume de France.

H: Madam my interpreter, what says she?

Alice: Dat it is not be de fashion pour les ladies of
France – I cannot tell vat is baisier in English.

H: To kiss.

A: Your majesty entendre bettere que moi.

(*Henry V*, V, ii, 265-80)

The play ends with Henry as heir to the throne of France, demanding that the King of France, his father-in-law, address him in a polyglot fashion, the three languages - English, French, Latin - reminiscent of the three languages - Latin, Greek, Hebrew - in which Pilate had Jesus styled 'King of the Jews' (John 19: 19-20) - not to mention the superscriptions on the coinage.

Exeter: Where your Majesty demands, that the King of
France ... shall name your highness in this form, and
with this addition in French, Notre très cher filz
Henry, Roy d'Angleterre, Héritier de France; and
thus in Latin, Praeclarissimus filius noster
Henricus, Rex Angliae, et haeres Franciae.

(*Henry V*, V, ii, 354-60)

Each detail of *Henry V* seems to be worked out in response to and in defiance of the celebrated speech of John of Gaunt, whose onomastic word-play - 'Old Gaunt indeed, and gaunt in being old' (*Richard II*, II, i, 74) - neatly conceals his own non-English origins, in that Flemish city anglicized as Ghent.

Thus, against the chauvinistic isolationism of Gaunt's vision –

This fortress built by nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war....

This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall....

(*Richard II*, II, i, 43-7)

we should find relief offered in the horizons of the French King's nuptial orisons:

Take her, fair son, and from her blood raise up
Issue to me, that the contending kingdoms
Of France and England, whose very shores look pale
With envy of each other's happiness,
May cease their hatred.... (*Henry V*, V, ii, 366-70)

Both visions may be inadequate and sentimental, but to turn the white or chalky cliffs of Dover⁷ into pale shores is progress of a kind: the unstable progress of translation and retranslation: cliff to *bord* or *marge*, to shore; white via *blanc* to pale.

Saussure's cardinal hypothesis is that words function not by virtue of their diachronic etymologies, but through their structural synchronic positioning, in a system of differences without positive terms. In the 1920s and 30s, in the Prague Linguistic Circle, N.S. Trubetsky, with his friend Roman Jakobson, came to understand entire languages as themselves functioning in a similar way, their lexical and syntactic features being modified in the interests of either assimilation to, or differentiation from neighbouring languages. That languages from different 'families' show assimilative features had led earlier linguists to the concept of the *Sprachbund* - a bond between contiguous languages independent of or in excess of any philological connections. The figure of the *Sprachbund* was presumably taken from the world of trade, a customs union. Most of

⁷ In *Henry VI, Part Two*, III ii 101, the exiled Queen Margaret looks back at 'Albion's wished coast': 'As far as I could ken thy chalky cliffs'. The laments of Mowbray and Margaret are conflated in Macaulay's 'A Jacobite's Epitaph' c. 1850: 'By those white cliffs I never more must see,/By that dear language which I spake like thee....', after which the white cliffs of Dover enter popular mythology and song. We should recall the earlier and earthier instance of those cliffs, in *The Comedy of Errors*, when one Dromio is describing his twin's wife as a globe: 'Where England? I looked for the chalky cliffs, but I could find no whiteness in them.' (III, ii, 133)

the work on *Sprachbund* has been concerned with assimilation: Trubetskoy was the first scholar to be interested in the way in which languages *diverge* from their neighbours, not the better but the *worse* to be understood. (Jakobson, 1990: 180-83, 204) The divergence in pronunciation between Swedish and Danish might be taken as exemplary of such bonded differentiation. And in pursuit of an analogous differentiation in the coinage, one makes, not a common currency, but a hole in one's own sovereign.

The Single European Currency ought to represent not a dialectical movement towards ever closer union - a displacement of sovereignty onto a higher plane - but rather a radical rearrangement of the economy of signs, the most obvious feature of which would be the reconfiguration of the coinage, of that contract between material and inscription, Lessing's *epigram*, on which sovereignty has for so long been, somewhat dubiously, grounded. Our currency is already for the most part virtual, our financial signs are mostly in the negative, and the discourse of credit may be leading us into an arithmetic in which value, like transcendence, is always and necessarily an absence. The physical model of balance - balance of payments, double-column bookkeeping, with which the book (*liber* = book, *libra* = balance, hence *livre* = pound sterling; note also *libellule*, the butterfly on the Danish 100 crown note) is so intimately, almost epigrammatically bound - that physical model is being replaced by the semiotic chain, or better, by the semiotic scroll, from which there is no escape: the virtual scroll of the virtual text, without an outside.

If such thoughts are abstract, consider Kant's play with the Negative, what became of it in Hegel, and then what happened in the most radical commentary on Hegel, the seminars given by Alexandre Kojève in Paris in the 1930s, from which all that is most radical in recent European thought seems to have derived its momentum. The European Union is not entirely unrelated to 'Continental philosophy'. (Nor would certain of the enemies of both be surprised to learn of a connection.) It is, I think, not well-known that after 1945 Kojève withdrew from philosophy and became an influential political adviser. An anecdote reported by Lionel Abel deserves wider notice (and

scrutiny): General de Gaulle's notorious, brusque "non" to British application for membership of the EEC was directly due to Kojève, who had explained to de Gaulle that, British philosophers being naive empiricists, Britain would be a hindrance, and not only at the theoretical level, to the project of the new Europe.⁸ Kojève was probably right, alas. It was their empiricism that led Anglo-Saxon thinkers in the eighteenth century to protest against the idea of paper money. Such an objection may be said to characterize empiricism, that tyranny of common sense; in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson 'a paper currency is employed, when there is no bullion in the vaults.' (cited in Shell: 19)⁹ Critical and theoretical thinking of the non-empirical kind which passes in English (and is largely passed by in English) as 'Continental philosophy' has prepared the way conceptually for the projected re-ordering of European semiosis.

It is in these terms, and at this critical moment in the very idea of 'Europe', that Anglophone Europeans might like to begin again to understand English literature, not as a monument, but as a body of watery signs, composed of nothing essential - all currency, fluidity, exchange without centre or fixity. The words that we speak do not issue from an inmost essence, but are always already echoes and recyclings of what we hear and hear of, of what we are always about to issue and spend.

Texts written in English might be defined, first of all, as texts not in the neighbouring languages; there is no way of appreciating those differences, or of understanding the material dynamics of literary traditions, or of the single common currency of literature, if we are in ignorance of those linguistic and literary contiguities. For almost the entire period in which the literatures of the modern languages have been studied, the model of study has been organic, as of a tree growing in its native soil, receiving some foreign influence

⁸ The intriguing anecdote, ascribed to Professor Stanley Rosen, is recorded by Lionel Abel in *The Intellectual Follies: A Memoir of the Literary Venture in New York and Paris* (New York: Norton, 1984), pp. 174-5.

⁹ See also Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, Part One, Book II, 'The Paper Age': 'Bank-paper, wherewith you can still buy when there is no gold left.'

in the form of air-borne particles. We prefer not to recall the frailty of English, even after Chaucer: 'After the Norman Conquest English became as submerged as the Celtic languages are now; at the Council of Constance in the fifteenth century it was classed as a minor dialect of German.' (Frye: ix.) The organic and essentialist model can be replaced by one that is concerned not with monuments but with fluidity; one in which the sovereignty of a text is not inherent but is negotiated at its borders. To see *Beowulf* in the context of Norse literature; to read the Middle English lyric in the knowledge that Marie de France, living in England, chose to write her *Lais* in French; to see the achievements of 16th century English in the context both of the continuing Latin and revived Greek traditions, as well as of all the other emerging European vernaculars; to be aware always of the pressures and temptations of Gaelic, Erse and Welsh; to acknowledge that many English poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were as adept at Latin as at English verse; to value translation, not as a derivative and contingent process, but as the prime motive and constitutive force of language; to see exile not as an aberration in English literary history but as normative, as it so plainly is for the lexicon; to understand that the English language - lexically the most hybridized of all European tongues - has been nobody's birthright, but always a contested domain of calculation and ideology.

And in pursuit of such an understanding of literature written in English, there may be no necessary advantage in working within the native-English-speaking world, nor any disadvantage in thinking with students and colleagues for whom English is not the 'native tongue' but a challenge to tongue and lip, and fluency a deliberated attainment. For these reasons - not essential but systemic, reasons which validate exchange around an empty centre, a hollow crown - I count myself privileged to be poised on two rims, of Europe, whose currency may yet be one, and of the Østersø, whose word is sterling yet.

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