

DIARY

Roger Scruton



I travel back from London with the St Matthew Passion filling my head, after the moving performance from the Elysian Singers and Royal Orchestral Society under Sam Laughton at St James's Piccadilly. Why does that last chord send shivers down the spine? The dark instrumentation, the sense that it is not an ending but a beginning, that this shadow-filled saraband will repeat itself for ever? Or is it just the story — surely one of the greatest narratives in all literature, in which nothing is redundant and yet everything is said? I arrive home with the chord still in my head, C minor with a B natural thrust like a sword into its heart. It foretells the week ahead. I devote the rest of the day to my report for the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission.

The commission has concluded that beauty in ordinary architecture is inseparable from the sense of place. I explain it to the family. It is almost the first time we have sat down to dinner since work started on the commission some three months ago. What a relief when it will be over at last, and we can be together in the place that is ours.

On Tuesday, at a meeting of the commissioners and advisory board, I explain our work so far: visits, conversations, focus groups and the public spirit and decency of all the people we have encountered. Even if the politicians are at a loss to understand the problem, the people seem clear about it. The problem is ugliness — the glass and concrete cubes in the towns, the houses dumped in the fields without streets, centres or public spaces, the abuse of historic settlements and cherished landscapes that once were somewhere and now are nowhere. Do we have a solution? I am determined to find one.

To Paris on the Eurostar — always a treat, not least because it leaves from St Pancras, the clearest proof that beauty, utility, popularity and adaptability all go together. Something similar greets you in the Gare du Nord, though here it is the façade and the street that generate the sense of place. I am met by Damien Seyrinx, my publisher, and we go straight to the 16ème, where I am

to discuss the French translation of *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands* on France Culture. Unlike the BBC, the radio palace is sparsely frequented, with isolated figures working in boxes, some of them reading books. The interviewer is polite, and I am looked on with gentle compassion before being dispatched back to a peculiar country that cannot make up its mind about anything but which nevertheless is still admired, not least because it can produce something so weird as a conservative philosopher. I am pressed for time and Damien orders a taxi moto,

which speeds me to the Gare du Nord in 20 minutes of hair-raising architectural glimpses. I telephone home, to learn that I have been sacked from my position as chair of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission. It was bound to happen, but I am astonished to learn that it is because the slanderous stories about me are all being recycled. How did this come about? I must have given an interview somewhere! And then I recall a slimy whippersnapper from the *New Statesman* who came to visit, saying the paper wished to write about my books.

Miraculously my family forgive me for that interview. The children are adamant that there should be no resentment but even a measure of sympathy towards the journalist. He probably thought that you make friends on the left by making enemies on the right. I open the computer: hundreds of emails in support, but nothing official to say what I have done wrong. If there is evidence to incriminate me then obviously the *New Statesman* must make the tapes of the conversation public: how else will any of us know what we are allowed and not allowed to say, when working for this government?

I am more cheerful on Friday. Emails arrive from friends in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Latvia, Slovenia and the US all saying that they had once believed in British conservatism but can do so no longer. My favourite rabbi from Jerusalem offers to rally 'Jews for Scruton', my favourite architect from Homs quotes consoling verses from the Quran, my favourite journalist on *Le Figaro* says we'll come out fighting. The family is right; don't feel resentment, but be grateful instead. If this hadn't happened I would not have known the weight of friendship behind me.

The week ends with a trip to Cambridge for the memorial celebration for one of the dearest of my friends, the mathematician, biologist and musician Graeme Mitchison, who died of a brain tumour last year. He would have understood exactly what Bach meant by that C minor chord with a hole in it.

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