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THE DISCOMFORT OF STRANGERS

I remember some of the books I first read in English—in my late teens, early twenties—motivated by natural enthusiasm, unabashed by the fact I had never studied it.

Then what? That you could learn an idiom by means of formal instruction didn't occur to me. I'm excusable: in school I was taught Greek and Latin. Two dead languages: no wonder grammars were needed... No one would come around and sparkle a conversation, giving you the opportunity—through mimic, expression, and tone—to puzzle out what meant what. That, of course, I presumed the most natural way to approach another tongue.

I treated English literature with brave, irresponsible naivety, persuaded sentences from hit songs, random words from advertising and business, would somehow clear a path through the narrative. I had all the time I wanted (eternity was ahead of me). I enjoyed a thrill of discovery. That I grasped the plot, or didn't, made no difference to my pleasure.

One of my aunts taught English in school (which could have warned me, of course, about the practicality of studying it—but I failed to realize the evidence). Tiny paperbacks trailed around her living room. I am quite sure I first grabbed Mansfield's "The Fly", thus igniting a life-lasting passion for the New Zealander. She remained a favorite author, after further, mature examination—yet my zeal was due to the charm of that first reading, made magical by the little I understood and the much I imagined, supposed, erroneously deducted, stuffed between lines. If "The Fly" has overlapping metaphorical meanings, I added further complication, through the blur my ignorance spread on Mansfield's terse sentences.

I remember treasuring another slim tome: "Rumble Fish". No idea where I found it, but the thing traveled in my backpack for a while. I savored it in installments, managing to make it last like a saga. I gathered notions of violence, solitude, and illness, from the page—that I found compelling... I appreciated lyric tone and vivid imagery, though understanding a word out of twenty-five. Such synthetic (parenthetical?) approach didn't bother me. In a way, reading under such conditions is like watching a landscape from a train: an activity I had practiced since a tender age. If it doesn't permit detailed description, it allows ensemble view. Its fugacity owns a peculiar appeal.

I'm not sure I entirely made sense of the title. Fish was certainly involved. An aquarium might be broken, or explode at some point. How, I am not sure, though the blast (surmised or real) contributed to the general vividness. While details remained vague, fish was a solid element, so to speak: probably of metaphoric impact, like the fly of my previous read. The two animals insured continuity: my learning wasn't flourishing in a vacuum.

Fish, and what else? Maybe weapons... a knife? Was fish sacrificed for plot's sake, just as the fly was? I can't be sure. It's not memory failing me: I never figured what happened, besides approximations.

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A sense of English literature being gloomy, prone to disaster, not an advocate of animal rights, alas, took hold of me. Such impression was sharpened by my following picks: James' "Turn of the Screw", and Mac Ewan's "Comfort of Strangers". James' was my personal choice: I bought it, then put it in my backpack, to accompany me during a six-month hitchhike in the Baltic regions. My laborious exam of the page, evoking an archeologist's sweat over Rosetta's stone, could transform a fable into an encyclopedia, saving me precious money and lightening my baggage.

But the reading left me in a depressive state: I amplified doom and terror, sucking every single word in great depth, by the effort of deciphering its meaning. Even excellent focus has its down sides.

Let's not talk of "The Comfort", handed down by a friend, who thought its Venetian setting would ease my understanding. Certainly I recognized the town, so alive its very dampness chilled my bones, while I advanced through the page. But, again, the plot I didn't grasp was transuding sadness, meanness, mischief, and someone's sacrifice. Animals weren't hurt: people were—cruelly sacrificed by people. Though I never unraveled the plot, it still aunts me.

Next, I dug my way through a ponderous Indian novel, "Coolie". A real saga, this one: another friend sent it as a present. I felt both compelled and entitled to the reading, not to disappoint the trust I was given. It probably took me a year, but I was glad to realize—for the first time—good results to the trial-and-error device I stubbornly applied. I was capable of enucleating recurrent vocabulary through the first 50 pages, later recognizing it, gradually specifying its meaning through context, memorizing and assimilating it. Reading became easier as I went along. I, of course, would be zeroed again with the next book, but why worry? Since the present tome wouldn't end anytime soon.

After "Coolie" I felt almost native. Indian, British? Not sure.

Then I took a break, proportioned to the effort endured. I mean, a few decades.

Writing in a language other than your original one has disadvantages—though many, of course, manage. It is feasible. But, especially if the new idiom is learned in adult age, a slight handicap never abandons the writer. Editing (by someone else) might be the solution—the crouch you'll never be able to leave in the closet. It will catch those elements of usage, only usage allows absorbing. And you might not have time for sufficient usage, because usage takes time. It means time.

Odd-sounding turns of phrase only sound odd to the acquainted ear. To the stranger, they simply sound new. A sensitiveness to how a phrase must be turned, to feel right—meaning natural—is acquired based on the number of times you have heard it. Cannot be truly taught or described. Thus, a deaf zone accompanies the non-native speaker, or writer, similar to the blind spot in the mirror you experience while driving. It's a matter of angle, geometry. It is a fact of physics, independent of will. A blind spot can't be seen, by definition. The only way to efficiently deal with it, is

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to know its incognito quality. Being aware something is there you're not aware of: if it makes sense.

It does. People know how to drive. How to turn back when needed, checking the blank corner with more than a lateral glance. Thus, non-native writers might rely on external advice. Or at least be aware of the risk, luckily not crash-implying.

Only implying some clumsiness, the occasional fall. Even after many years, writing in a foreign language—especially if acquired late in life—is a tightrope walk, encompassing the thrill such activity evokes, the literal “high”.

There are slight advantages, too. Notably, the fine dissociation between words and their significance. It might be—it will become over time—a hair-thin fissure. An almost imperceptible gap: still present. Meaning that significance is not born with the word, as it happens when you are born within the language. They will never perfectly adhere. It is hard to believe, but believe me. A most minimal out-of-sync-ness will forever remain. In your native language, meaning and word are hand-in-glove, practically inseparable unless you are in agony, or going nuts, or on drugs. In a foreign language, no matter how well owned, a word keeps autonomous features—independent from meaning—see-through, superimposed. Sound values. Shape, design. Mainly, associations with elements non-inherent to the language: similarities with words, things, concepts, belonging to other languages, histories, cultures, experiences.

To the non-native, words can't avoid echoing spurious resonances, even when she takes them at face value, when he uses them—as they should be—just to say what he wants to say. It will be said a bit differently: with a tinge, a bent, an involuntary bias.

This quirk can have some charm—be considered a paradoxical plus. But it is a minus. Strangeness is not the best of statuses, language-wise, never preferable to belonging. Let me go back to Mac Ewans' haunting title: to the meanders of Venice, so full of dead ends—widely intended. Owning the map of a linguistic domain is better than glimpsing from a vehicle launched at full speed, gathering fascinating impressions, but unable to properly chart the territory. Staying linguistically put is certainly wiser, for a writer.

Although, uncertainty has its unique flavors. I know.