

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO DISCOVER A NEW PLACE? ENCOUNTERING THE FOREIGN

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A while ago, at a conference in France, I happened to be the witness of a casual conversation. A participant from the hosting city asked another French scholar: "You seem to live out of France, right?" The other replied: "Yes, over the past three years, I have been conducting research in the United States. Have you noticed something in my accent or in my manner of expressing myself?" "No, not at all, you speak French without foreign accent. It is rather that your way of being and acting is different. You must have acquired something in America."

Conversely, I have sometimes been puzzled by the fact that some of my acquaintances, having spent years of study or work in overseas countries, have not the least been affected by the great variety of their experiences abroad. Upon their return, they took up a regular train of life as if they have never been in Germany, in Japan, or in Australia. True, some tried to live exactly in the same environment they left in their home country and were not at all interested in changing their daily routines. But others made an effort to expose themselves to the radically different ways of living and thinking. They wandered the streets, visited distant places, and enjoyed their contacts with local people. Upon their return to their own country, they related their experiences at length and with vivacity. However, as I could observe them, these encounters neither changed their personality nor enriched their character and sensibility. I thought that this absence of transformative influence was probably due to their inability or unwillingness to apprehend and understand whatever appeared outside their familiar and secure path.

Pierre Ryckmans, who is better known under his pseudonym Simon Leys, questions the truth-value of the myth claiming that travel or extended stay in a foreign country enriches one's personality and changes one's outlook on life or even physical appearance (49–61). He refers to a remark of the theologian and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin who, having gone to fetch a friend at the railway station in Peking, suddenly realized that a prolonged journey somewhere in Central Asia did not affect all those who descended from the train. Travelling to a distant place and living there for an extended period of time does not touch and transform everyone.

These individual observations lead me to cautiously advance a distinction between two kinds of experience of a new and foreign place. There are people indeed who, as they arrive in a city or a country, come into contact with the language, system of values, and particular set of customs, conventions, and ways of living of its inhabitants. They also notice the disposition of the streets, squares, parks, and buildings. While taking their first steps in this new milieu, they apprehend the distinct atmosphere of the place. They are curious to know about its history and social structure. They are

ready to alter the organization of their daily life or even make an attempt to speak the language of the people they meet. They may take their meals at different hours and, if possible, in the company of local people. They take the train, in the third class carriage, go into shops, visit the market, and participate in some festivals in order to acquire a better sense of the hustle and bustle of an urban or a rural community. They also visit churches, pagodas, and monasteries, and hike rugged mountains or spend relaxing days near a peaceful lake. But all these more or less significant experiences leave no lasting imprint on them. Their personality remains impermeable to any suggestion of transformation and closed off to any possibility of enrichment. They remain fixed in their own conditions, views, and prejudices and go as far as seeking to obtain the confirmation of their previously formed ideas and preferences.

There are others, however, who not only come into a contact with an alien culture, but they also consciously immerse themselves in it: they seek to perceive whatever is new and different, to understand it in its depth, and to react to it in particular ways. For instance, they are not only attentive to the atmosphere of the place, but they also perceive its influence on them and their response to it. They notice how people communicate with each other and gradually make their own some of the bodily aspects of verbal exchanges. They try to find out how people feel and think in some decisive moments of their life (in presence of birth or death or while expressing love or grief) and adopt elements of these different emotional and spiritual reactions. The explicit awareness of the separation and contrast between the foreign and the familiar, the new and the old, the unknown and the known, and the willingness to make place for the former in their lives, elicit in them a transformation, which can be slight and short-lived, or significant and long-lasting. In the latter case, the change affects their whole personality, their outlook on the chief aspects of their life.

In this sense, discovering a place, as I see it, is the encounter with the foreign and different, followed by an effort to understand and to adapt. It is an adaptation to forms of conduct, to languages, and to a system of norms and mores in such a way that the addition does not cancel out all the elements of one's own culture. In a discovery, we acquire, as it were, a dual citizenship: we bring together and display what seems to us the best and the most pertinent of both cultures. This integration may create in us a sense of complementarity and harmony as well as an acute feeling of dissonance and tension.

The inner richness to which Ryckmans refers comes from the ability to place the familiar cultural elements into a wider perspective provided by the strange and the foreign. When we encounter what appears to us as strange cultural behaviour (ways of greeting, courting, or negotiating), our own culture remains present as a horizon in the background, from which we perceive and evaluate what occurs in the foreground (Haeffner 1996, 136). As a consequence, what has been so far familiar and conventional, with regard, for instance, to the economic, artistic, or domestic lives, gains, under new light, a heightened understanding and precision; what has been integrated as strange and foreign becomes gradually more meaningful and acceptable. Essentially, it is the contrasting relationship that makes both the opposite poles more comprehensible. And, in my view, it is the inner presence, awareness, and acceptance of opposite modes of existence and contrasting cultures that create, in the person, a concrete richness.

But let us return to the opinion stating that we are unable to come to discover what is radically distinct from ourselves. It has been strongly defended by Victor Segalen, an enigmatic French writer, whose work reached a wider audience only years after his death in 1919. In his *Essay on Exotism*, Segalen maintains that the contact with foreign culture yields incomprehension and inadaptation rather than understanding and discovery. "Let us not pretend that we can assimilate customs, races, nations—the others; on the contrary, let us rejoice in our inability ever to achieve such an assimilation; this inability allows us to enjoy diversity forever" (Segalen 44). Exotic knowledge is the perception and acceptance of radical differences. This knowledge carries with it a benefit: the awareness of the limits and possibilities of the self rather than the adaptation of the self to the other. The encounter with a definite and irreducible otherness throws us back onto ourselves: we then may gain a better knowledge of ourselves and the inner springs of our growth within our own culture. What could stifle this growth is not the incomprehensibility and the distance but the elimination or degradation of diversity, the increasing uniformity experienced in our modern world—a drab uniformity sustained, in part at least, by the perversion of extended travel: instantaneous tourism.

Uniformity begets prejudice, absence of tolerance and of discomfort, and, above all, an escape from the self; it numbs the sensibilities for the spirit of our own place and age; it destroys the fecundity provided by the exotic power, the power of being distinct, of coming face to face with ourselves and eliminating the ignorance and the deception of ourselves.

This idea of the impenetrability of societies, and the people living in them, could be questioned if we carefully examine some of the characteristics of culture. From an anthropological perspective, culture is the sum of our acquired behaviour, and the results of the behaviour, as opposed to the abilities, creations and possibilities of our innate constitution. This unity of productive practices may include arts, laws, values, institutions, habits, beliefs, knowledge, customs, and styles of living, tools, artistic works, and many other elements. Culture is what we think, imagine, conserve, articulate, and make of our world. A particular culture is seldom immune to decisive influences coming from other cultures. Thus the American culture is, involuntarily, also African, Irish, or Spanish, and, likewise, a specific African culture contains considerable French, English or Portuguese elements. To a more or less greater extent, each culture is, in fact, a "culture of cultures."

In addition, there is the possibility of consciously appropriating the representations, artistic expressions, religious beliefs, social customs, and dominant mentalities of other cultures and, by doing so, recognizing their positive value in the shaping of both individual existence and communal life. The opposite is also true: a society may resist, filter, or fight off, tacitly or openly, a certain foreign influence. However, a hermetic closure from outside influences, a complete cultural homogeneity leads to decadence and eventually to the paralysis of a particular culture.

A society tolerates within itself what is different and foreign to itself but, to a certain extent, familiar for an outsider; it is this familiar otherness that sets in motion the adaptive contact with its culture. Thus the discovery of other cultures is made possible, in part, by the doors and roads created by the presence of what is foreign in a culture and what could be, at the same time, familiar to the person coming from abroad.

In an essay on the ways of perceiving human affairs, Helmuth Plessner, asks the fundamental question: how can we understand something or somebody? It is a well-known fact that, in our everyday life, in our familiar milieu, as we come into a contact with people and their behaviour, and take care of our business, our vision is highly selective, focusing on some specific areas and wandering aimlessly and thoughtlessly through many others. We tend to see through the lens of conventions, habits, and familiar verbal expressions. In order to become aware of all these everyday realities in their richness and complexities, we have to perceive them "through other eyes." When we are able to establish between them and ourselves a distance and have come to be exiles in our own familiar milieu, then we see objects and people as unfamiliar and strange realities. "True awareness is wakened in us only by what is unfamiliar," writes Plessner. He also says that "[T]o be able to look at something, we need distance" (30). Without a distancing estrangement, there is no genuine understanding.

When we visit a previously unknown place, the acute feeling of estrangement may be absent, or at least tempered, if we seek to single out what appears to be familiar. It allows us to feel at ease and mitigate our sense of alienation from people and the surroundings. We filter the perceptual field by focusing on familiar objects and by applying our own conceptual interpretation on events as they rise moment after moment.

On his return from North America aboard a ship, the German philosopher Josef Pieper met passengers who have spent quite some time in the United States because they wanted to see the New World with their own eyes. "*With their own eyes: in this lies the difficulty,*" writes Pieper. "During the various conversations on deck and at the dinner table, I am always amazed at hearing almost without exception rather generalized statements and pronouncements that are plainly the common fare of travel guides" (31–32).

What could then liberate our vision from the familiar elements and create the needed distance from things and people? What could help us to see foreign reality in its particular foreignness?

We fail to distance ourselves from a particular situation when we are unwilling to stop and ask the appropriate questions. "Why someone smiles when tragic events occur?" "Why they never say what they think?" "How a feast is organized and what is the purpose of some rituals?" In order to understand it, the foreign has to be meaningful to us; it has to be apprehended as a meaningful reality. The meaning is provided in the act of our reflective inquisitiveness; it carries a meaning, however vague or ambiguous it may be, in the form of question itself.

The question may be part of the more comprehensive human act of wondering. To wonder is to introduce the distance of reflection over an object that is no longer considered obvious and evident. In wonder we stop, pay close attention to something or somebody, seek to reach beyond what is apparent and taken for granted, or even beyond what is opaque and obscure, and start to inquire about some hidden and still unknown elements, facts, or causes. As we come to a stop, we admit that our knowledge is partial, inadequate, or insufficient to provide us with the required orientation or secure footing in life. Conversely, the inability to wonder comes from our overwhelming familiarity with our surroundings and a habituation to an existence devoid of surprising and uncanny events.

In a distant land we find ourselves "*dépayssé*", to use a quite apt French word. The experience of moving around and meeting people without the secure 'points of reference' acquired in our familiar environment causes, as we all know, a certain amount of stress or even anxiety. Once again, what allows us to gain distance and see things with different eyes is the discomfort and disturbance that occurs during our journey. Just as much as we look at our own environment with different eyes during times of trouble, equally we gain insight into a foreign culture when we have to experience some unforeseen pain. "Pain," Plessner tells us, "is the eye of the spirit. [...] It awakens us to new consciousness, liberates the vision and makes it resistant to the refractions and the opacities of prejudice" (32).

Beyond the experience of wonder and of pain, it is art, above all literature that opens doors to the realm of the strange and unfamiliar. Writers and poets provide us with the necessary distance; through their work we come to a better understand of what has been familiar and what comes to us as alien and strange.

C.S. Lewis contends that literature makes possible an "enormous extension of our being." By reading novels or short stories we come to "see with other eyes." We "enlarge" our being, we see, imagine, and feel as others see, imagine, and feel, and we do this without losing ourselves. "Not only nor chiefly in order to see what they are like but in order to see what they see, to occupy, for a while, their seat in the great theatre, to use their spectacles and be made free of whatever insights, joys, terrors, wonders or merriment those spectacles reveal" (139).

Another English writer, D. H. Lawrence, rightly tells the reader to think of America and American literature in terms of difference and otherness. "There is an unthinkable gulf between us and America, and across the space we see, not our own folk signalling to us, but strangers, incomprehensible beings, simulacra perhaps of ourselves, but *other*, creatures of an other-world. [...] It is the genuine American literature which affords the best approach to the knowledge of this othering. Only art-utterance reveals the whole truth of a people. And the American art-speech reveals what the American plain speech almost deliberately conceals" (17–18).

The idea of creating art-speech leads us to the idea of making things strange, defamiliarizing them, *ostrannenie*, which is well known in literary studies. Writers introduce into their works all the distorting elements (selectivity, partiality, exaggerations, boldness in construction) in order to make the reader more sensitive to particular places and cultures. Their "distorted imagination" creates a "strange, wonderful, terrible, fantastic world" (Frye 10). Paradoxically, it is the writer's ability to invent people and situations that makes reality accessible and comprehensible. Writers, together with their readers, yield to the advice of John Fowles: "If you want to be true to life, start lying about the reality of it" (17).

Even a casual encounter with men and women living in a foreign country may make us aware of some of their views and opinions. We also notice their attitudes towards other people and the judgments they advance on the more or less significant events occurring in their environment. They declare themselves for various causes and select both beliefs and facts in order to sustain their choices. Although we are in possession of all this information, we still fail to grasp their inner condition, their emotional state. We still do not know why they act in a certain way, what makes them hold

on to some opinions and easily discard others and how they select and interpret facts. We do not know why they like to listen to popular music or to Bach, why they are eager to be in the crowd of a football match, and why their communications with their spouse or friends reach an unsurpassable limit. In order to understand their world-view and the springs of their actions and preferences, we need to go beyond their everyday speech, the role they play in a particular community, the characteristics of their work and leisure pursuits, and to learn more about their inner inclinations and feelings.

Literature unlocks the doors leading to the realm of feelings and helps us to understand their bearing upon one's life. This connection is usually hidden from our view because we are all prone to conceal it or to convince ourselves that feelings are blind or muddled and, therefore, they play no role in our decisions. The vision of the artist, writes Plessner, "lifts what is invisible in human relations, because it is familiar, into visibility; in this new encounter, understanding is brought into play" (31). Whereas, as D.H. Lawrence puts it, a verbal symbol stands for a thought or an idea, the symbols used in literature – art-symbols, art-terms—"stand for a pure experience, emotional and passionnal, spiritual and perceptual, all at once." In other words, a novel communicates to the reader not only the prevalent mores and conventions of a historical era and the actions that unfold within the confines of a given society but also, and above all, a whole state of mind or a "state of being" of men and women whose greatest challenge is finding the right balance between what they want to be and what they are called to be.

The novels, stories, and plays of Sherwood Anderson and Thornton Wilder helped me to better understand the spirit of the Americas. Today, with the exception of *Our Town* and *Winesburg, Ohio*, their works are no longer prominent on the reading lists of university students. Although some of their concerns and themes may seem dated, the stories of these two eminent writers still offer us a glimpse to the "strangeness and wonder" of the everyday lives and thus create the appropriate conditions for a genuine understanding and discovery of what we might call the American reality.

At the heart of this reality, there is the pervading feeling of loneliness, of being always at the edge of the world and of never belonging to a place or to a community. A distracted tourist fails to perceive this uncanny feeling. Yet it is still one of the root conditions in North America and both writers have important and relevant things to say about it. Most of the protagonists of Wilder's novels and Anderson's stories are lonely figures, yearning for the love, recognition, and understanding of their fellow human beings, for a warmer human contact that might give deeper meaning to their existence. Interestingly, while reflecting on some of the chief characteristics of the art of literature, of storytelling, both writers draw attention to this fundamental condition. For Thornton Wilder, who gave a lecture on this subject, the American loneliness is the inevitable correlate of the desire of independence, the disconnection from a particular place, and the distrust of authority (34–47). And here is what Sherwood Anderson says on this aspect of American life: "...it is my belief that we Americans are, in spite of our great achievements, an essentially lonely people, and this may be true because we were, in the beginning, a transplanted people" (47).

My cursory insistence on the value of literature, I admit, may appear questionable and outdated. Questionable because, as Graham Greene notes, "perhaps it is only in childhood that books have any deep influence on our lives" (13). Outdated, since very few people seem now to have the time and interest to read the classics. People like to travel, to surf on their computer, or to learn how to cook exquisite dishes. If they go to a bookstore they might grab one of the *Lonely Planet* or *Zero Belly Diet*. Yet, in our age, when we hear so much about the death of the printed-word, perhaps it is not out of place to care about the human heart and still to believe in the transformative value of literature.

But one thing I hold as certain, that the forthcoming Inter-American Studies Center of The University of Szeged cannot avoid the thorough study of American culture. But, as Iris Murdoch has pointed out, "the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations" (34). All the more reason, then, to give to this central element of the American culture—novels, stories, poems, and plays—the attention it deserves.

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