

This is the last month in Guatemala. In August, I will go, to Taipei City, Taiwan. I am excited at the prospect of *everything changing*. Of being at the beginning again, and beginning again the slow process of learning a new culture and a new language.

When I first arrived in Guatemala, I thought, "*English is useless...*" and "*What I know is not worth knowing!*" Because what value does a language and a body of knowledge possess, once there is nobody else present that understands them? This is the pathos in those occasional newspaper stories, of the only surviving speaker of an obscure language, and of how this person will go to the grave with the painful awareness that they take *an entire language* with them. So sad. My situation was more prosaic. *They* spoke only Spanish and *I* spoke only English. I recall one night, standing on the roof of my place in San Pedro la Laguna, with Antonio, the landlord (and fisherman), "discussing" the World Cup, and in the end, communicating our enthusiasm only through smiling and by waving our arms.

Words had become useless. Or, I had become aware of the fact that words are useless. In place of a *currency*, language, with which I could express myself, I now experienced my thoughts as no longer having suitable vehicles with which to *make themselves known*. That was precisely the sentiment - "I am unknowable..." And, equally, a man such as Antonio, the landlord (and fisherman), was unknowable. Perhaps this is our situation with regard to *everybody*, including those who *speak the same language*. Perhaps, especially with regard to those who speak the same language, where the presumption establishes itself, that we possess some essential similarity, that to share the same native tongue is to have much in common beyond this simple fact. I am not convinced that this is true, more, that we desire it to be true. Nothing hurts more than to be misunderstood, to be misread, by those we believe should understand us. It is far worse than not being understood at all, for while the latter is a problem with a specific attempt at communication, the former is a problem with the entire notion of communication itself. It is the angst of the teenager, "Nobody will ever understand me!"

I pursued the comfort of strangers, of interacting with English-speaking people, and then came to realise that there are no strangers.

And there is, finally, no comfort. This was what pushed me further away from those I could communicate with easily (with this ease often intensifying into, with mystifying speed, a strain of *instant camaraderie*, generated from the group, where somebody or other would assert, sooner or later, that we *were all in the same boat*), even while I still lacked the Spanish skills to permit what I felt was *a suitable range of expression*. It was never enough to just say, “I want...” or to be able to read menus and ask where the toilets are. There was the desire to demonstrate that I was not imprisoned by this new language, but that I saw it as a new territory, as a site of great exploratory value. The form this demonstration assumed was twofold: firstly, I would communicate my thoughts in Spanish, but secondly, the words I employed would show the listener that I was *making choices*, this adjective or that adjective, this verb or that verb. Finally, I wanted to be able to use my Spanish to make people laugh. Not at my lack of facility, but at the arrangement and the content of my words. I believe that the successful transmission and reception of a funny thought, evidenced by laughter at *the other end*, that this is one sure way to know the intended aim was duly achieved. Because for me, laughter equals success.

So, I made it to that point, and then used comedy and laughter as one means of gauging my progress with the language (and the culture, as the shared references of Guatemalan culture, of any culture, provide a framework for frivolity). I started out, feeling my way, like a child learning to speak (and receiving that sort of encouragement, that disproportionate reaction to simple things, done for the first time), and over the course of two years, I felt my adult self flowing into the language and shaping it in a more personal way, until, finally, I started to say things that I felt *were me*, to express a thought without passing through English on the way, or, crucially, feeling any impediment caused by my knowledge of Spanish. This is a great delight – to feel that a thought can be sent two ways towards its appearance in the world, English or Spanish, and that the decisive factor is oneself, and how one feels at precisely that moment. Good vibrations.

Now, as I prepare to leave, the previous words of this document remind me, of both the challenge of learning a new culture and a new

language, and of the enormous rewards. Importantly, when I have written my fictions, in English, I felt that was the height of my creative use of the language. When I speak Spanish, however, I feel again, continuously, like an electric current, that strong sense of language being creatively used, as I consciously navigate a path, attempting as best I can to not just make myself understood, but to present carefully formed sentences, sentences that have a form appropriate to the language, and that also permit my character to make itself known, too. At times, I wonder if the consequence of this is not that I am better understood, or appreciated, *essentially*, by those I communicate with in Spanish, rather than my fellow English-speakers, who perhaps have more models, more types, more classes, to drop both me and my words into, and, as a result, are perhaps more occupied with this classification process than with what is actually being said and who is doing the saying. The foreign object is visible, while the familiar passes unremarked.

I have certainly become aware of such a mechanism operating within myself. I regret the easy classifications I have made, both of myself, and of others, and realise that this was often not helpful. It is painful to think of the idiocy that permeates my past, and at how my intelligence has so often been short-circuited by my prejudices, my petty obsessions, and my anxieties. I have watched myself, at times, with exactly the same sense of utter frustration that I can feel pouring from those around me. And that this was done in the presence, largely, of *friends*, makes it even worse. The thought that people remained friends despite these things, and, who knows, were reduced to ignoring me, waiting for whatever had caused the latest bout of ranting and raving to relinquish its grip. I feel so sad that I felt that was who I was, though I never felt I was doing this because it was what people expected. More, it was what I had come to expect of myself. I saw closed and bolted doors at every turn, or yet another example of human stupidity, that rightly or wrongly, I felt had been conceived, designed, and executed, for one purpose and one purposely only, to quite deliberately piss me off. And to make life feel even less worth living.

I still have this strong reaction, that certain arrangements of words on a page, or of music, or of images on a screen, have the capacity

to destroy life, to destroy the potential of those who witness them (and are evidence, after the fact, of the destruction wreaked on those who created them). To me, this is integral to any notion of *caring about the power of creative endeavour*, and that those things that fall short are not all simply benign, and best forgotten, but may become malignant, and establish a new paradigm, so that, by degrees, things unwind, and the audience, and the artists, are negatively transformed by the appalling success of a Coldplay album or a film directed by Sam Mendes or a book written by Ian McEwan. And everybody learns to settle for even less than before. I advocate, always, the destruction of that which is itself destructive, and I do this without feeling that this is paradoxical, no more than a gardener who protects the life of a plant by uprooting weeds would feel any sort of conflict.

What has changed is that I am no longer *immersed* or *saturated* in these things. Or, at the least, that was how it felt, in England. I remember the small death I would die when a new series of *Big Brother* came onto the horizon, and of how, shocked, in Dublin, in 2006, after two years outside of Europe, thirty seconds of *Gardener's World* re-activated the Charlie Dimmock circuit in my brain. I never wanted a Charlie Dimmock circuit in my brain. And, finally, for me, that is what it comes down to, in my host culture, that *speaking the same language* and *sharing common frames of reference*, these things render the human organism astonishingly vulnerable to thousands of useless products and the ever-increasingly refined means by which these useless products, be they candy bars, new cars, the BBC autumn drama schedule, a new album by Dido, and so on, are introduced to the mass audience. I felt myself exploding due to this, and the experience was perhaps intensified by my prodigious memory, and by my equally prodigious inability to forget, so that these *campaigns* felt more like *vendettas*, the sole aim of which was to accomplish my destruction. It is said that a schizophrenic regards mass communication in a similar way, at times, so that the “You” that an advert is pitched at is interpreted in a wholly literal way (or perhaps not interpreted at all). Whatever, it was driving me mad.

Living outside of England has shown me *the nature* of my thoughts about England. I appreciate now that there is an England that

only exists in my mind, a set of memories and a set of attitudes to these memories, and that the memory and the corresponding attitude function as *integral units*, if they are not challenged, so it becomes impossible to vouch for *what really happened*, for example. This helps me understand why I have friends that I respect, and who I may share many opinions in common with, but, on this fundamental question, of the value of England, of its pluses weighed against its minuses, that we may fundamentally differ, and perhaps always will differ. In that respect, the England I ran away from was an England that existed only in my imagination. And, by running away, that England has undergone a slow transformation, just as I have (we are inseparable).

As a person, until I left England in 2004, I would never have guessed the *practical lessons* that simply being somewhere else would provide. Guatemala, back then, was simply a nine letter word. Now, it has expanded and become an entire world, a new world that offers me both the chance to start again, or to have the feeling of being able to start again (is there a difference?), and of also being able to compare, to contrast, the culture here, with my host culture, and to consider the arbitrary means by which human needs can be accommodated (and frustrated).

The move to Taiwan will produce a triangle, not just when I look at the locations on a world map, but also in oneself, a person with three sides, and each side in a dialogue with the other, English, Spanish, Mandarin, if I consider the linguistic dimension, or European, Latin American, Asian, if I consider the cultural one. So there, finally, is a compelling reason for my leaving Guatemala for Taiwan, the urge to add another side to my figure, to go from point, to line, to shape.

Amen!