

and he said he even had the ability to see all the stars in duplicate. In other words, he saw the stars and, beside them, the reflected light of each one of them. I tried to tell him that probably what he saw wasn't the reflection of a star's light but a different star. But he assured me that no, he could even see the moon in that way. Obviously I didn't want to insist...

G • It's interesting how encounters like that make impressions on us and we remember them for years afterwards. I had a memorable conversation with a homeless man in Paris once. We struck up a conversation while I was walking along the Boulevard Raspail, being a flaneur, as they say in French. He had arrived from the Czech Republic and had been sleeping in front of a store in the suburb of Bobigny for some months. The particular street he was in sounded miserable. Maybe Bobigny is actually a pleasant place but from his description I've since thought of it as being otherwise. He was tall and thin, dressed with a sense of style, like the homeless man you mentioned, and wore dark cat eye shaped glasses. He told me that he was a photographer and, in his thick accent, said « I vas lookink for ze Paris of ze tventies, in black and white ». It seemed so literal, the

way he pronounced it, as though he really expected the city itself to be in black and white. He also had a great fascination with and knowledge of the composition of food and described molecular processes and digestion in minute and graphic detail, telling me about them in the same familiar way most people relate mundane events in their lives. When I returned to Paris some years later I was amazed to come across him in a square off the Rue Mouffetard directing a photo shoot. Suddenly he was a powerful man, really well dressed this time, surrounded by glamorous models.

A • Wow. Did you speak with him?

G • No, I didn't know what to say and didn't want to intrude. I stood and gazed at him for a long time in amazement, witnessing how radically he had changed his circumstances in just a year or two. Now, when I remember meeting him, I think about how we have a tendency to draw conclusions about people based on momentary encounters without having an inkling about their past experiences. I mean, just as this once homeless man had «come up in the world» so too have many people we encounter when they are down, such as homeless people, been up at one time. But we have a tendency to pass them by

without seeing them in a full, multi-dimensional way. I guess it's because our thoughts are so taken up with other things; our consciousness is so fragmentary and limited.

A • I think that each of us have this kind of marginality deep inside the unconscious. Some people are brave enough to let it come out, others no. The homeless are normally very sensitive people and often they don't manage to deal with practical life. Others instead accept practical life but live in a very frustrated way. As they don't feel at ease in human relationships and social situations, they place affections on a superficial level. Whether compensating for it with addictions, or in exaggerated affections towards animals, or turning to have foibles etc.. Some others rebel and put it into aggression... and then come the intellectuals, the artists, etc. From my point of view, we are all made out of the same stuff...

G • I agree, but some people want to deny it, putting more emphasis on what makes them distinct and different and less emphasis on commonalities. It's a more self-protective choice. Also, nowadays more than ever, people can feel overloaded with information, that there's so much bombarding us, and there's a need to shut it out. Having a single-

minded focus is considered a necessary element for success too.

A • Getting back to what you said about the man in Paris, I remember that some years ago I visited a show in the Pinakotek der Moderne in Munich. It was about contemporary artists working with portraits in their life. A very interesting show. One of the artists — at least this was mentioned from the curator — was a homeless man who used to paint portraits in the streets of Munich, I think. Or was it Berlin? Well, now he is being shown in known museums. I still remember this because I particularly liked the portraits he was showing there.

G • It's interesting how he went from being marginalized, like the Czech man I met, to successful, financially successful, I suppose.

With success there's the distinction between public success and personal success. The grey areas and gradations too. Personal success is so subjective and so difficult to measure. It's so important to measure us against ourselves, rather than against others, don't you think, and to give ourselves credit for what we've done, the steps along the way, rather than be paralyzed by what remains, what appears to remain. But back to

marginalization, I've known people who've moved to remote islands to detach themselves from society- I mean, who've sought out places without people and who've chosen to be without the internet. I also know someone who moved to an island where there was internet and she made a point of having contact with people she met virtually rather than get to know the people around her, with whom she thought she didn't have anything in common. She thought she had very special interests that her neighbours didn't share. Then her computer became infected with a virus and she got to know a neighbour who fixed it. They discovered a mutual interest in magic realism and began sharing books by Jorge Luis Borges and Isabelle Allende. Eventually they travelled to South America together. It was there that I met her and she told me how she had spent several years living almost as a hermit on an island.

A • And moving to a remote island, can you imagine doing that?

G • Well, I think I would enjoy a short period of solitude, to think deeply and gain clarity about what is important to me. My life is very diffuse and I'd like to have the opportunity to focus on just a few things instead of many.

At the same time, living in a foreign country as I do, and as you do, has something in common with living on a remote island, in the sense of being surrounded by a foreign language and by people with very different roots. In that way, you're more inclined to be in your own world. Do you find it that way - that you can be in your interior world more because of living abroad?

A • Oh! It's surprising how you put this that way, I never thought about it. I guess you're right, when you live in a different culture than yours, you're obliged to assimilate the most as being strange to you, and in that sense you feel a sort of isolation. Not only because being an adult you have to learn basic things again from the very beginning, like learning a new language, or how to relate with people which have a rather different behaviour than yours in daily life, or even to deal with the weather in winter — which can be very unpractical and difficult. Somehow, with the time you tend to go deeper in your interior world as well as in human relationships, I would even say, to concentrate in what you feel it's essential. Both things are very enriching, and you discover things in yourself you never thought you had.

G • Yes, it's kind of like that for me - I only ever

talk with one neighbour, a woman who happens to be in her 90's and who goes for neighbourhood walks. Somehow, opportunities don't arise to talk with anyone else, nearby.

Something I like about being a foreigner is that I'm free from being affected by aspects of my country that I don't like, and that affect me when I'm there. I'd like it if one day I could be back there and be detached, the way I'm living abroad. I'd like to have that mental freedom and the fresher perspectives you can have in a foreign country. Is it like that at all for you?

A • mmm... well, this I don't know. There are things I don't like in my country, but there are also things I don't like much in this one. The thing is, that when you live in a foreign country you don't have the same freedom that you have in your own, to protest about things you don't like. You are being welcome in a new country. In this sense you should try to adapt and be thankful, not the opposite!