

Notes on a paragraph from 1922, by M*I*n K*nd*ra

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Abstract. This paper is written as a pastiche of a notable European novelist, and essayist – it is the essayist who is being imitated, my first effort at this. I make some notes on a paragraph from a well-crafted fiction by Stacy Aumonier. I use the pastiche mode not just for fun but because readers may prefer the bolder and less qualified style, despite some information loss.

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“Exiled again—

It was only a matter of when!”

We are all familiar with stories of exile from what were the communist countries of Europe: Czechoslovakia, Poland, and so forth. But to be exiled from France, cradle of the Enlightenment – to attend a conference in England and find that one’s passport is suddenly invalid – is another matter altogether. I contacted a friend, an engineer, who contacted a friend of his and information was passed along a chain until I was told what to expect. Forgotten fictions would be taken from attics and the question would be posed: why is your work any better than this?

How to read such fictions today? How, for example, to read this paragraph from 1922:
She had never been out of England before, and she had a horror of travel, and an ingrained distrust of foreigners. She spoke a little French, sufficient for the purpose of travel and for obtaining any modest necessities, but not sufficient for carrying on any kind of conversation. She did not deplore this fact, for she

was of opinion that French people were not the kind of people that one would naturally want to have conversation with; broadly speaking, they were not quite “nice,” in spite of their ingratiating manners. (1923 [1922]: 25)

I offer some notes.

(a) All the English regard the French as rude. Their driving is unruly. They won't speak English to tourists, even if they know the language. Of course, little was different in 1922. The character is surely not travelling to the France of common experience. She is travelling to the France of literature. Recall the opening paragraph of the opening letter of Voltaire's *Letters on the English Nation*, the Quaker who complains “The people of thy country are too full of their bows and compliments.”

(b) It is a predictable dialogue, endlessly repeated, with trivial variations: “This character is so prejudiced.” To which someone replies: “You have to take into account the time in which she lived. It was different then, when prejudices were acceptable which today are not” But we must not be fooled. Anti-racist discourse was there from decades before (Rossetti 2005 [1870]: 81), if not centuries. Liberalism is of England's essence. Even in 1922, there would have been readers who reacted against the prejudice and no doubt we are meant to, as well!

(c) In one of his essays, striking a humanistic chord, Max Beerbohm tells us:

At the school where I was reared there were four French masters; four; but to what purpose? Their class-rooms were scenes of eternal and incredible pandemonium, filled with whoops and catcalls, with devil's-tattoos on desks, and shrill inquiries for the exact date of the battle of Waterloo. Nor was the lot of those four men exceptional in its horror. From the accounts given to me by ‘old boys’ of other schools I have gathered that it was the common lot of

French masters on our shores; and I have often wondered how much of the Anglophobia recurrent among Frenchmen in the nineteenth century was due to the tragic tales told by those of them who had returned from our seminaries to die on their own soil. Since 1914, doubtless, French masters have had a very good time in England. (1921 [1919]: 297-298)

Beerbohm – now almost forgotten, along with the laughter he records – was widely read at the time amongst literary figures. We can be sure there was once a project of tracking all the ways in which the English interact with the French and our paragraph is a contribution. In place of the whoops and inquiries into the date of Waterloo this: in the jargon of social science, a pragmatic sub-conversational competence.

(d) The character in our object of analysis comes from the sleepy cathedral town of Easingstoke. Furthermore, “in her were epitomized all the virtues and ideals of Easingstoke.” (1923: 24) By implication the paragraph awakens in us consciousness of a problem: even if some have all the formal qualifications for making conversation, they have passed all their French exams with flying colours, they cannot actually make conversation with anyone but those of similar prejudices. Or they can but it is unnatural and such a person does not engage in the unnatural.

Nevertheless, she finds herself in a complicated situation, our Miss Natural. But I leave this for interested readers. Of course, the unnatural is nothing strange for a novelist in exile. The novelist in exile must write for audiences who lack his formative experiences of life. He must find ways to communicate what few others would. We can compare him to an engineer: by his writing he must engineer a bridge between himself and readers. And why does he write at all? Whether exiled or not, he writes for future audiences, of whom he can only have the murkiest notions.

Note: I do not wish to personally endorse the final paragraph of the pastiche above, but at present I more or less favour the interpretations expressed prior to it.

References

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