

THE SWISS SCHOLAR

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I have been for many years a teacher of languages.
It is an occupation which at length becomes fatal to
whatever share of imagination, observation and insight an
ordinary person may be heir to. To a teacher of languages
there comes a time when the world is but a place of many
words and man appears a mere talking animal not much
more wonderful than a parrot.

JOSEPH CONRAD, *Under Western Eyes*

I beg your leave to call our man *** Maska.

Mr. Maska was an altogether attractive middle-aged professor of American literature at one of those uppish universities overlooking Geneva Lake. I use the adjective “uppish” mischievously on purpose, for I know he would be much disappointed by my defining him through a British adjective; were he here, he would surely rebuke me and suggest my using “high-hat” instead. I know it’s unfair of me to make fun – though gently, to tell the truth – of such a distinguished and esteemed scholar who has devoted his whole life to increase the knowledge of his fellow human beings (those “hoi polloi” he peculiarly pitied and scorned at once), but unfortunately I can’t help it: I am an unreliable narrator, far from being either omniscient or unbiased.

But let’s go back to our man. As I was saying, Prof. Maska – though already in his fifties – was an attractive man. Despite his Slavonic-sounding name (Russian? Polish? Serbian? who knows...) his aspect was decidedly British, as he was a slender, flaxen, lightly-freckled man of a remarkable smartness. Yet, his Briton-like elegance clashed with his unmistakable American accent. Although everybody could immediately recognize the Americanness of his inflection, nobody during his years spent teaching in Switzerland was ever able to localize it geographically, and rumors spread among both students and professors. Some argued that the distinctive accent of Harvard alumni had left its imprint on it, others claimed it to have been influenced by some alleged musical studies in Broadway, and someone even maintained that it had been a former Californian lover of his (an actress, presumably) to transmute his daily speech into a ceaseless performance of Yankeeeness. Had they known the truth, what a great surprise it would have been to them to discover what I know! In effect, although I can’t tell you where he came from exactly – but, I assure you, this omission is not meant to be an ill

turn; it's just that I ignore it myself – I know for sure that he really had Slavonic origins, and that he viewed this innocuous happenstance as the most obnoxious, virulent and pernicious fault of his own life and self.

Nothing was known about Prof. Maska's childhood and adolescence – in his résumé he seemed to have been born the day he graduated from some prestigious (though, alas, little-known) university, but I guess this was rather what he wanted people to think. Still, I do believe you may infer something about his past from a few of his behavioral idiosyncrasies. First and foremost, he was a compulsive talker: once he had started prattling of James or Wharton (among other thousands such favorite topics, of course), it was impossible to stop him, and sometimes not even the desertion of the whole audience could restrain the precious nuggets of knowledge to gush forth – still melted in a raw liquid state much akin to dribble – from his lips. Also, his velvety speech was sometimes coarsened by a sudden raucity, thus betraying the insidious ghost of an enemy which had been defeated long before. Prof. Maska was secretly frightened by the eerie remnants of that long dead foe; yet, there was another 'enemy within' which he regarded as even more perilous.

I can't tell exactly what it was, for he never revealed his fear to anybody; however, his beautifully phlegmatic features suddenly metamorphosed into an aghast grimace whenever it came to uttering such Greek words as *xenophobia*, *aletheia*, *anaemia*, or *eulogia*. It may be that he was not conversant enough in that language, or else that he was not familiar with the concepts themselves; anyway – whatever the reason for his tremendous and overwhelming fear – he unfailingly ended up modulating his voice (imperceptibly, I assure you; for nobody but he could ever hear this modulation) through a very slight – as well as involuntary – decrease in pitch the very instant he would speak the final diphthong *ia*. There seemed to be something about that sound that terrified him by betraying a secret he deeply wished to keep hidden from anyone. Was it the memory of a misdeed? Or was it some kind of congenital fault? Although ten years have elapsed since the facts I am relating happened, I can't still tell – and, I suspect, I never will.

One of the crucial moments of his life and career – which, in his mind, were not as clearly separated as they are on this page by the physical presence of the conjunction *and* – was the national conference of literature that used to be held in Zürich every year.

He loved participating in this annual meeting, for it was on this occasion that he could challenge his colleagues in learning and – still more thrilling – parade his American accent, display his British manners, show off his German detachment, as well as exhibit his unique (or so he thought it to be) mixture of French courtesy and Italian joviality.

“This year I will teach them a lesson they will never ever forget,” he told his assistant, M.lle Fausse.

Although stealing the limelight from so illustrious a character might seem blasphemous to some readers, I feel bound to tell you a couple of things about this charming creature before going on with our story. M.lle Fausse was a stout Swiss young woman of twenty-seven, who – in spite of her bulkiness – used to define herself as “a ledi-laik, well-mannèrd researcher.” So graceful was she as to have earned the sobriquet of Stavrogina, as Prof. Maska – to the contentment of her ingenuously cocky heart – used to call her. Ingenuous she was indeed, and to such extent that malevolent tongues sometimes dared call her lovely artlessness “gullibility.” Yet, I invite you not to give credence to the insinuations of these green-eyed people, for – far from being gullible – M.lle Fausse was a rare mixture of cleverness, innocence and heroism. Heroism especially, as this naïve creature had committed herself to a life of self-sacrifice for the welfare of the humankind. Holding the strong belief that – since she was a woman, had read a couple of books (one, if we malignantly leave out the phone book she had looked up on that very same morning) and was younger than sixty – she had the duty to play the role of inspiring muse of her ripe professor, she was determined to help him engendering his works of genius destined to enlighten the “accursed grovelling vulgus.” So, it was with the zeal and self-neglect of a martyr that she used to carry her heavy burden daily – for the most part, to the unhallowed shrine of the broom closet where Prof. Maska liked to await the miracle of inspiration with her.

It was precisely after one such literary ritual that he got the idea for the talk to give in the following national conference.

– “What will the sujet of your tok bi?” – she asked him, looking forward to participating in the harvest of whatever seed (wild oats, probably) she herself had contributed to sow.

– “Ah, *ma chérie*, its title will be “The deepness of shallowness; or, the misinterpretation of meaning.” Doesn’t it sound *so* good?”

– “Of course it das. Everyfing you du is *soo* good” – she replied, blushing while leering at him, her eyes glowing with lust (for knowledge, of course).

The understated response to this likewise understated praise was an insouciant smile Prof. Maska debonairly cast her before asking bumptiously:

– “Can you see what this title mean?”

– “Mmh...to tell the truf, well, I see no mining in it” – was the muse’s slightly embarrassed answer.

– “Oh, gosh! You are so brilliant, darling...It’s only you that might possibly have grasped the point immediately” – was the luminary’s enthusiast reaction.

– “*Bien sûr, c’est naturel...*” – this unexpected compliment confused and flattered M.lle Fausse to such extent that she immediately lost any linguistic and logic command of her speech; therefore, she just sat back and stared admiringly at her preaching Pygmalion while he was overheatedly elucidating his dodgy theory.

– “As you probably know, honey, linguists and semioticians have always argued that signs are meant to convey some kind of meaning. Some – such as de Saussure – have even gone so far as to maintain that a sign and its meaning are as inseparable as the recto and the verso of the same sheet of paper. Well, for the benefit of the whole humankind I will finally eradicate this weed from any book of linguistics or semiotics! How can it possibly be that people have swallowed so absurd an idea for such a long time? Of course it’s a whopper, and the worst that has ever been told in the whole history of humanity! See, darling, my contention is that it’s completely the other way around, as communication is based precisely on *misinterpretation*. Words, signs and symbols lack any necessary or conventional meaning whatsoever, and are only meant to deceive the interpreter: this is the only possible truth we can aspire to. Think about this, sugar: we are ourselves signs meant for deception and contrived for misinterpretation, aren’t we?”

M.lle Fausse – who had lost the thread at the mysterious word “semioticians” – found no other way of concealing her misunderstanding from Prof. Maska but through nodding smilingly, in a heroic effort of seeming much persuaded by his brilliant speculations. Prof. Maska saw it as an invitation to continue his impromptu lecture, and enthusiastically went on:

– “Well, then. Signs have no precise meaning; as a consequence, they are shallow forms devoid of contents. It is up to the interpreter to attach some kind of meaning to them, but this meaning is fated to be completely arbitrary and subjective. This is the deepness of shallowness, this is the power of misinterpretation, which is the very bedrock of knowledge and self-awareness as well!” – Prof. Maska uttered these words in a weird, overexcited tone; his eyes were gleaming and his chin trembling from wild inspiration. M.lle Fausse smiled. She was satisfied with the hatching of so brilliant a theory, and delighted in fooling herself with the idea that her stimulating power over that man’s mind was greater than Zeus’s headache when he gave birth to Athena (for the sake of accuracy: the other book she had read was an illustrated handbook of mythology). So, she slunk away from the room in silence, leaving Prof. Maska’s genius to burn in meditative solitude.

His meditative solitude lasted three weeks, during which he rarely got out of his office. At the end of this time, he finally peeped out of his door with a radiant expression, and told M.lle Fausse:

– “*Ma petite Stavri*, I’ve got it! That’s the best thing I have ever written in the whole of my life...I will strike them all dumb, darling!”

M.lle Fausse’s unexpected reaction poured cold water on his sparkling enthusiasm. Far from rejoicing over his success, she stared at him, manifestly appalled. After a long while in which she couldn’t speak one single word, she finally rushed out of the room on the verge of tears.

– “That girl is growing too fond of me...I need make an effort to be less amiable and attractive, otherwise one day she will go completely crazy...probably she already *is* crazy about me. But how can I help it? It’s not my fault if I am so good a mentor for that promising creature...It’s my duty to guide her, and that’s what I will do, whatever the cost for the two of us! “*Paris vaut bien une messe*”, and *connaissance vaut bien un p’tit cœur brisé ! C’est pour elle que je le fais*... Knowledge is experience, and experience is sorrow! This is sucking the marrow of life; this is drinking from the very spring of wisdom...now it’s painful, but she will be very grateful to me when I have made her into the most distinguished scholar of Switzerland!” – So, thoughtfully mulling over his duties as a mentor, he closed the door and pensively sat at his desk.

Prof. Maska was not one to bear a grudge, and five minutes later he had already forgotten Mlle Fausse's surprising reaction to his triumphant enthusiasm. In effect, he had no time to fritter away worrying about a girl's hormonal mood swings: he was too busy applying the final brush strokes to his masterpiece to get distracted by such trifles. It was only at twilight that he could finally take his eyes off of his script and prepare his rehearsal to make sure the following day's performance would be perfectly flawless. So, he took away the lacquered Japanese screen behind which, hanging on the wall, was a circular mirror he normally used for evaluating his rehearsals (and, every now and then, to give his fringe a jaunty 'I-have-just-got-out-of-the-bed' air) and...what he saw when he looked into it! In the flickering light of that winter dusk, a gloomy, spectral figure was staring at him. His blood chilled in his veins, and for a long while he could neither move nor scream: he was petrified by fear and, his mouth agape, was completely unable to stir one single limb. Likewise, that sinister figure was gawking at him from the glass surface, motionless and as stone-like as a gargoyle. Every time he would recall this episode later in his life, Prof. Maska would always have the impression that whole centuries had elapsed between the moment he first saw that figure and the instant he would recognize it as his own image.

Yet, his reaction was unexpectedly prompt, for interest soon replaced fear and – more curious than frightened – Prof. Maska drew his chair closer to the mirror and started peering at his features with the detached interest of a physiognomist. Not a single trait of his beautiful face had gone through a change; still, he was no longer the same man as he had been thus far. Something had radically transformed him and made him unrecognizable even to himself, but it was hard to tell what it was exactly that had been changed about his complexion. Certainly, the light in his eyes was different, and so was his smile; even the gracious dimples on his cheeks and chin had mysteriously altered. This new sight was at first loathsome to Prof. Maska, but as the minutes went by he grew increasingly familiar with it, and after a couple of hours he started finding it somewhat fascinating. By midnight, he ended up falling madly in love with the new Maska, whose faded-away features seemed to have been softened by the brush strokes of an invisible painter.

– “What a fine, Monet-like *morbidezza* is now in my traits...It's as if an invisible sculptor had chiseled my mortal clay after a statue by Rodin, Medardo Rosso or

Vincenzo Gemito...What a uniquely indefinable beauty my face is suffused with! I've got the impression that the famous lines "I belong to nowhere and nowhen: I'm all-knowing, / Though nothing 'cept something unknown" were written for my own vague and impalpable splendor..." – And so, forgetful even of his talk to rehearse, he went on eulogizing his newly-attained perfection till daybreak.

When the time to join his colleagues came, he was in a state of enchantment which is difficult to describe. While traveling from *** to Zürich a foolish smile ruffled his lips, and an absent-minded look betrayed his having just fallen in love – still, no one could have imagined that the object of his desire was he himself. In this peculiar state halfway between dizziness and inebriation, Prof. Maska got out of the train in Zürich Hauptbahnhof and – fluttering, rather than simply walking – reached the university, where his colleagues had already gathered. Although the conference had started nearly three hours earlier, our man was not worried in the least about his unusual delay; in effect, in the programme he figured as the very last speaker – an unexpected circumstance prompting him the flattering idea that he was to end the conference on a high note. His odd intoxication dangerously reached its heyday when – after saying "good morning" to several colleagues who peered at him perplexingly before making a reply – he realized that they could not recognize him. What a formidable sense of unlimited power this gave him! He felt he was virtually all-knowing and completely unknown at once, and – from this privileged position – he could now find out things which had been inaccessible to him so far.

Determined to take advantage of this unexpected stroke of luck, Prof. Maska discretely let his eyes wander around the room for some minutes, until they finally focused on a knot of people who were having coffee in the immediate vicinity of a drinks dispenser. Everything about them was rather common and orderly; yet, they inexplicably seemed to arouse Prof. Maska's interest. In particular, his eyes were fixed on a gray-haired man who was quietly sipping his coffee while smiling to the joke of a young man he was chatting with. He was decidedly not the kind of person a casual onlooker would be likely to single out amongst the crowd. His face was rather plain, and so were his clothes; his voice only had something remarkable about it. In effect, it was so incommensurably agreeable that – when poured into its listeners' spellbound ears – it had the same effect as syrup on a sore throat. Its uniquely enchanting melody

was able to add a further meaning – which was never twice the same, but changed according to its player’s modulations – to any word he spoke, no matter how trivial it was. As any magician worthy of this name, also Prof. Echt (for this was his name) had his own tricks, the most important of which I will now reveal to you: the secret of his magic mainly lay in his slight (yet recognizable) German inflection. It was precisely thanks to this peculiar feature – which many among his colleagues viewed as a fault – that he was able to reinterpret the classics of American literature by ceaselessly attaching new and unexpected meanings to them.

I have always been fond of rhetorics; so, please, let me show off a little bit by using a euphemism: Prof. Maska decidedly disliked Prof. Echt. I am not allowed to tell you the reasons for the bad blood between them (which, in any case, are too numerous to be listed in these few pages); the only thing you need to know is that a long lasting – as well as one-sided – antagonism had slowly perverted Prof. Maska’s professional competition with Prof. Echt into hostile rivalry. Gloating over his rival’s impending defeat, Prof. Maska crept closer to his enemy while goggling at him with the circumspect gluttony of a wolf pointing at a hare. Once he had joined the knot of people gathered near the dispenser, he slyly camouflaged with the surrounding environment. Accordingly, he alternatively laughed, nodded and looked interested – always mindful of not exaggerating, lest he should arouse his prey’s suspicions – in a constant effort to conform to the swaying tones of the conversation. When he felt that his face had become familiar and at once unnoticed to the members of the group, he dared speak a few brief and insignificant remarks. He said “Ah!” whenever something meant to be surprising was revealed, and “Oh...” whenever unpleasant situations were detailed; “Hihi” when crisp witticisms were uttered, and “Mmhh” when doubts were raised. As soon as he perceived that he had become part of the group – and that it was now too rude for anyone there not to pretend to know him as he knew them – he started addressing some of his colleagues by name, asking trifling questions or uttering irrelevant remarks. After two or three successful attempts – his unknowing victims looked startled to hear a stranger call them by name, but, in their embarrassment, felt bound to pretend knowing him as well – he finally turned to his hare.

“Ernst, old fellow, why the dickens haven’t you greeted me so far? You’ve been so busy chatting with that young colleague of yours that I might suspect you’ve been

pretending not to have seen me all this time! Come on, tell me how you are!” – While thus approaching his foe, he grasped Prof. Echt’s hand and shook it vigorously; in the meantime, he was leaning towards him with parted lips, uncovering two rows of teeth of a perfect whiteness.

Prof. Echt was visibly embarrassed, but he didn’t want to be rude to that colleague who was addressing him so amicably, as if they had been friends for a long time. So – despite pretending was decidedly not his forte – he made an effort and replied cordially:

– “I’m fine, thank you. And you?”

– “*Pas mal, merci*. Yet, I will surely be better after you have told me the topic of your speech. You know, I have been pining for learning it for weeks: you always have such brilliant ideas...I can’t help feeling stimulated by your prompts...”

Prof. Echt’s expression betrayed unfeigned astonishment mixed with slight discomfort, for he always felt uncomfortable with praises. In effect, he knew he had some virtues, but he also was painfully aware of his numerous faults, and therefore he was inclined not to take compliments too seriously. And this especially when – as in this case – they were exaggerated and somewhat unmotivated.

– “Thank you. I am flattered, but I *know* I am really undeserving of such praises” – His unexpectedly frank and straightforward reply startled Prof. Maska, who saw his plan end up in smoke in the twinkling of an eye. Yet, Prof. Echt mistook his colleague’s bitter disappointment for distress – thus, the hare was caught in the trap.

– “Please, forgive me. I didn’t mean to be rude, dear colleague: it’s just that I feel a little nervous about my talk. You know, – he started in an endeavor to smooth his previous rudeness into a confidential tone – I am going to approach a subject which has been little discussed so far, and I don’t know how the audience will respond to it”.

– “Ah...really?” – Prof. Maska asked in a mellifluous tone. Yet, his eyes betrayed a voracious interest which made his colleague feel rather uncomfortable.

– “Oh, well, nothing special, you know...It’s just that I am unsure whether my contention will be fully understood or not, for it’s a little complicated. I’m going to talk about what (in my opinion, of course) is a key psychological principle of several among Henry James’s novels, namely eleutherophobia...”

Prof. Maska turned into stone as soon as that unexpected word stroke him right on his head more violently than any baseball bat might have done. Petrified, he stared at his

enemy, who kept on opening and closing his lips as if he was still talking, but – surprisingly enough – seemed not to give out any sound. In a cold sweat, Prof. Maska started feeling so queasy and dizzy that he had the impression the room was being shaken by a sudden earthquake; then his eyes dimmed, and he found impossible not only to move, but even to breathe, as his heart was beating exceedingly fast.

– “I need air” – he mumbled in a strangled voice, his face as white as a sheet while trying hard (but unsuccessfully) to fill up his lungs with air. What a vain effort that was! He was not cognizant that too much oxygen was already in his blood, and that this excess was precisely the cause of that sudden crisis. He was desperately trying to open his mouth and nostrils wide, when Prof. Echt came to his help. In effect, all the scholars the room was filled up with had huddled round Prof. Maska, thus worsening the claustrophobic sensation that was oppressing him. Prof. Echt alone had kept his head, and – in a calm and firm tone – ordered his colleagues to keep at a distance from the sufferer, and asked for a paper bag. When he was finally given it, Prof. Echt gently handed it to his colleague and whispered softly:

– “Please, take a long breath in the bag. Yes, very well... again, please, again, ... slowly, another deep and slow breath...”

In a few instants the respiratory crisis was over, but Prof. Maska – completely exhausted – didn’t dare to raise his eyes from the floor. He was physically aware of the hundreds of eyes staring at him in amazement and morbid curiosity even without actually seeing them, as if they were darts thrown at his tired body and severely hurt pride. A new crisis was now impending on him, but this time – though it was more powerful than the previous had been – he felt it was less frightening, for he was not ignorant of its nature. Far from being as embarrassing and mysterious as his heart-attack-like stroke had been, this new rising tide (which was rapidly growing into a tsunami) had a name and a recognizable identity: it was rage, and a furious one. This rage was directed against the very man who was presently rescuing him from his embarrassment by offering him his arm while exhorting him to have a stroll in the open air: that man was, *natürlich*, Prof. Echt.

None of them would ever come back to that room. None would ever deliver his speech. None would ever see his own university again, for Destiny had decided that it would be the last stroll of their life. A few hours later Prof. Echt’s corpse was found on

the floor of one of the university restrooms; after a couple of days, the police declared that he had committed suicide on account of family troubles. As for Prof. Maska, he has not been seen at the Université de *** for ten years, i.e. since the time he shocked M.lle Fausse with his surprising “Monet-like *morbidezza*”. As my narration is coming to its conclusion, I want to be as frank and straightforward with you as Prof. Echt used to be: Prof. Maska’s disappearance was noticed by very few people. Among these few was M.lle Fausse, who day by day grew increasingly persuaded that her mentor had retired in a hermitage in Valais with a view of forgetting his love for her, which he probably suspected not to be fully requited. Anyway, thanks to her noble spirit, she soon forgave her beloved’s desertion, and she even managed to heroically forget it as soon as (some three weeks later) she was appointed professor of American literature in his place.

Personally, I do not believe in M.lle Fausse’s explanation for Prof. Maska’s disappearance; however, I have not found the solution to this mystery yet. So, I am bound to abruptly interrupt my narration at this point, with the hope that – like Prof. Maska and M.lle Fausse – you are not one to bear a grudge, and will forget my guiltless ignorance as well as my roguish reticence. As a token of my perfectly good faith in this matter, I will reveal to you something I have said to nobody else so far. I often think of Prof. Maska, and sometimes I believe I even miss him. I don’t know why, but this happens especially whenever – during the lakeshore stroll I usually have at dusk – I come across some horsemen placidly riding while enjoying the sight of the rugged Savoyard mountains mirrored in the waters of the lake. In those moments his absence turns into a bodily pain, for my very breath is taken away by melancholy, and nothing can soothe my sadness but the image of his rambling some frosty and wind-swept steppe on horseback. When I envision him thus, his features are not as faded-away as they were on the occasion of his last conversation with M.lle Fausse, but are once again as neat and clean-cut as they had been before his ill-fated transformation. I am afraid that the power of my imagination makes them even better than they actually were, for his hair – messed by violent wind gushes – are not flaxen, but golden, and his wan complexion is enlivened by a frost-caused pinkish blush tingeing both his cheeks and nose tip. Not only does my mind depict him as astonishingly gorgeous; it also transfigures him into a knight in shining armor, who – having gotten rid of his fears – spurs his horse while bravely shouting aloud: «*Ia, я, ia!*»