



Academic Year 1926-1927

London, 4 October 1926

When the train pulled out of Dover, dusk was falling quickly. The very fine soft mist made it harder to see the landscape clearly: there was one tunnel after another. After everything I had to listen to these last few days on the subject of the English climate and the lack of sunshine, I now had the impression that I was gradually going further and further into a smoke-filled covered space from which I would not emerge again until the spring.

At the end of a seven-hour journey, having had a quick view of London, which was crossed from one side to the other, I was agreeably surprised by the peace and quiet of a back room overlooking absolutely silent walled gardens, and then by the steady shine of the neighbourhood street-lights, harbingers of a stable life and of a compliant daily round. Soon, however, the dominant impression was another: that the silence was not a still one, between those high walls, but rather one which had a wafting motion, like a continuous, endless breath of air. A





dynamic silence, I would say, despite its peacefulness and its solitude. (*On other occasions, in London, in some square with few people about, in some isolated small park, I have had the same sensation: silence, in London, has a mobile quality.*)

West Kirby, 6 October

We are now installed, the weather very overcast.

The journey between Liverpool and West Kirby, which I shall have to make regularly, seemed rather desolate. Despite the drizzle and the cold wind, one could see occasional figures walking about in the green spaces which were not built-up. At first, looking from afar, I could not understand what they were doing. Then I realised: they were playing golf.

Going from the station to our hotel we went along a deserted promenade, following the coast. The waves were breaking impetuously: just as we were about to go into the hotel, a particularly impetuous one caught us out, soaking both the taxi and our luggage.

The evening meal was rather grim: all the main dishes were served up with horrible sloppy sauces. We ate hardly anything.

7 October

It was a delight to see at such an early hour – half past eight in the morning – the hotel's big dining room full of people all nicely turned out and ready for the day's work – the men wearing smart clothes, freshly shaved, hair tidily brushed; the women, in smart clothes, attractively made-up, hair fetchingly arranged. It was a joy to see (especially after last





night's fast) the tables laden with things to eat which were simple, abundant and nutritious. This was our full introduction to the English breakfast, and we did it justice. The place where we stayed in London had given us only half an introduction to it.

Afterwards I went out. My eyes were opened now to the character of English domestic architecture – typically the family house, from the relatively compact to the rather grand – of which I had only caught glimpses during the train journey. One agreeable surprise was followed by another, and my admiration grew at the same rate. Everything looked so well-tended, bright and clean, as though freshly minted: small front gardens, brick or stone-faced walls, trim white curtains to the windows, slate roofs.

Now I am sitting in the hotel lounge. All by myself. The fire is burning gently; sunlight comes through the window like a fine dust, warm and golden. Outside the sky is just faintly blue, and the sea seems enchanted by that delicate hue. A word tries to come to my lips: *happiness*. But I check it in time. It is a word to be heard, but never uttered.

8 October

‘And like an echo saying “Ulysses...”’ were the fitting words of the poet Rubén Darío as he surveyed the bay in Palma de Mallorca. Here, looking out on the Marine Lake formed by the Dee estuary and across to the Welsh mountains, rising up in the distance, the version would have to be: ‘And like an echo saying “Tristan...”’





11 October

In class. A student says:

‘I hate English history.’

And I ask: ‘Aren’t you English?’

‘No, sir: I am Welsh.’

And the fellow student sitting next to him, also Welsh, was quick to shake the other’s hand. At that point I understood why, a few minutes previously, when incidentally evoking lines of the Spanish poet Quintana on Nelson at Trafalgar, which end: *Inglés te aborrecí; héroe te admiré* – ‘I hated you for being English, I admire you as a hero’ – he tapped his fingers on the edge of the table, as if to show his agreement.

The other students in the class, all of them English, showed no sign at all of being riled. And this made me think of the confrontation that a small episode of this kind, so interesting in itself, would have caused in a Spanish university.

15 October

In class. I was trying to make a small change to our timetable. I tentatively suggested Wednesday afternoon. A student said:

‘No classes are held on Wednesday afternoons; they are reserved for sport.’

‘What about Saturday?’

‘No classes on Saturdays either.’

16 October

It is strange how, when I first arrive somewhere abroad, I have a feeling of being detached and distant from everything back





home. And it is strange too how soon my mind becomes steadily occupied once more by life in my own country, so that I relate to it all the things I see, everything I think about and everything I do.

17 October

I have been unable to understand properly the matter of tipping in this country. In accordance with what I once read somewhere or other, I made it my norm to give a percentage slightly above what would be usual on the Continent: my impression was that nobody took any notice. I asked around about the criterion to be followed: 'It's of no importance,' was the reply received from several people. My spirit, always inclined to see the best in everything, detected a sign of superiority in this indifference. And yet I just could not believe it. I would have liked to put it to the test by not giving any tip at all, once, only once, in order to see whether it really did not bother them. But I never found the occasion, never dared to do the bold experiment.

Finally, today, the opportunity did arise. So I put it to the test. And my conscience is still troubled with remorse about what happened. It will probably be a long time before I get over it. Even so, if there was ever an occasion when I have felt justified in letting a barber know my dissatisfaction about his work, this was most certainly it.

I was going to have my hair cut for the first time in England: the occasion did have its own importance, and its dangers. I was sitting in the chair and, while I was looking at myself in the mirror, I was forming the conclusion that will have been so often formed by men in this situation, that is to say: it is





precisely when we go for a hair-cut that our hair is just at the right length and the styling just as it should be.

The art of the conscientious barber – I reflected as the hairdresser was getting things ready to attend to me – ought to conform to the following objective: that the client, on leaving the shop, should look just as though he had not been in there. Tidying up the neck, marking the hairline around the ears without making them too conspicuous, very little else... But would any barber be capable, quite of his own accord, of doing just that? He will want to do precisely the very opposite: for it to be perfectly visible that the head in question has been in his hands. Very precise orders, the strictest instructions, are called for on the part of the client, and discreet vigilance too, especially at certain crucial moments. Otherwise, one is at risk of ending up, to all intents and purposes, with a different head. Even sometimes in spite of instructions and any amount of watchfulness... A snip here, a stroke with the razor there, and the damage is done.

Did events really unfold as follows? I could not now begin to say. I did my best to explain, with words and gestures, what I wanted. I did keep an eye on what was happening. I did speak up to stay his hand. The man had no idea. The only thing he knew how to do was to cut, and keep cutting. Until finally I had to steel myself and tell him to stop. And I was left looking as bald as a coot.

If I did not then put the tipping business to the test, it would never happen. But I had to pay close attention to all the effects. They were reflected clearly enough in the face of this northern Figaro. First off there was his look of seriousness. Then, as he realised the definitive and irrevocable nature





of my abstention, his face grew longer, and paler – I do not exaggerate. While I was knotting my tie and, by watching him in the mirror, continuing my psychological scrutiny, more than once I came very close to giving in and making amends. But I did not do this: on the one hand, a kind of playful enjoyment moved me to carry the experiment through to its conclusion; on the other hand, that look of offended dignity unsettled me slightly and impelled me to bring the scene to a close as soon as possible. Still, as I was opening the door to go out (with my man already lathering the chin of another customer), I looked back to say goodbye. But that face of his... that face was truly the mask of Tragedy.

Tippling certainly can be a matter of importance!

18 October

Forebodings about the shortage of sunlight ought really to be coming true by now. However, since we arrived in England, we have had only one day without seeing the sun; and today it has shone, from dawn to dusk, in a pure, delicate, exquisite sky. Very early this morning it was already playing its games of light and shade on the curtains of our bedroom. When I was on my way into Liverpool, it was amusing itself by gently pushing the mist out towards the furthest dormitory suburbs and villages. In town it gave a sheen to the mire in the streets and it made the sky smile slightly above the dark buildings. In the evening it faded into a matt golden glow on our windowpanes. I looked out and saw it just setting behind the Welsh mountains. The waters of the estuary were tinted with the bloody red of its extinction.

