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A MODERN ODYSSEY

Gilbert R. Davis

Spending the winter in central Italy as a guest lecturer at the University of Perugia provides me a special perspective on the theme of this Review issue, internationalism. The view from my apartment in the center of Perugia, high in the Umbrian hills, prompts reflections on the odyssey I began so many years ago when I finished my B.A. and passed a State Department Foreign Service exam. I was posted to Trieste, a "Free Territory" hotly disputed between Italy and Yugoslavia until 1954 settlement in Italy's favor. But when I took the oral exam I became a casualty of incipient McCarthyism. Answering truthfully that I greatly admired Eleanor Roosevelt and listing some of my recent reading effectively ended my hopes of a State Department career, but not my hopes of living and working overseas.

My first opportunity came with a sabbatical divided between Paris and London. During the summer and fall of 1971, I was a guest researcher in the new town planning division of the Institut d'Amenagement et d'Urbanisme de la Region Parisienne. Following that I spent the winter and spring of 1972 at the University of London in a seminar on community planning. Along with this I did research at the British Town and Country Association and visited over a dozen British new towns, meeting with planners and residents, and taking hundreds of pictures. I finished this sabbatical year (actually fifteen months) as a fellow of the Scandinavian-American Foundation, studying the new towns of Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway.

Apart from the interesting work and the understanding it gave me of the postwar European new town movement, I also enjoyed meeting and working with professional planners of the various countries. They helped me understand the problems and opportunities new towns presented as a rational form of urban planning. I could never have accomplished this without going overseas and talking to the planners and seeing the results of their work, both successes and failures.

Three years later I was invited to Yugoslavia as a senior research associate for the Johns Hopkins University Center for Metropolitan Planning. During the winter of 1975, I spent four months in Ljubliana (now the capital of Slovenia) at their center for regional planning, completing a study Johns Hopkins planners had been working on for several years. When I was not masquerading as "architect Davis," I was lecturing in language and literature to English majors at the university. It was a lovely experience: one day writing the report on a comparative urban planning project; the next, lecturing to students on Beowulf and the history of the English language. With my Slovene colleagues, I enjoyed the best of both—technical and literary—and our mutual respect was fueled by that warm spirit so characteristically Yugoslavian, before darkness fell.

My delight in living in Slovenia included a full agenda of cultural activities: playhouses performing in Slovene and Italian, symphonic and chamber concerts almost nightly, plus an opportunity to travel the peaceful days displa…

Each bore a trace of the national language with European expe… official) even sang in a clear sign of Eun… theatres a hundred miles.
By the early 1980s, after Fulbright had become a casualty due to political and financial problems, I had found myself in Florence, part of a group of German and American artists and scholars who were working at the Bibliotheca Nazionale in that city. From there I could see the domes of the medieval city, and I enjoyed the daily life of a resident opera and ballet company. In addition, I had ample opportunity to travel the country to see its various ethnic communities, which in those peaceful days displayed compatible diversity. Forever etched in my memory are the three Toscas I saw on successive Saturdays in Ljubliana, Belgrade, and Sarajevo. Each bore a trace of its location—most singing was in Serbo-Croatian (as the national language was then known), some in Italian (especially from those singers with European experience), and one Tosca (the American wife of a government official) even sang in English. Sadly, in Sarajevo the cast outnumbered the audience: a clear sign of European music’s lack of appeal for Bosnians. By contrast, our Ljubliana opera house—a perfect miniature of the nineteenth-century Austrian theatres a hundred miles to the north—was usually sold out every evening.

All of my Yugoslavian experiences—including participating in the first University of Sarajevo-Grand Valley State conference in 1977—have deepened my sadness over what has happened to its people. Though I have little sympathy for nationalism and its passions, my experience with the people of the former Yugoslavia (not of “ethnic groups,” as they are now abstractly referred to) remains with me as a source of both joy and sadness: joy for those I have known and sadness for what has been happening to them, victims of politically orchestrated hate.

My next overseas opportunity came with a 1985-86 sabbatical in Florence. By this time I had shifted away from urban planning—which had started out as an avocational interest and grew into something more serious—and returned (primarily) to language and literature. I spent part of the year at the Bibliotheca Nazionale, working on Puccini’s dramaturgy, and the other part as a fellow of the Nederlands Interuniversitair Kunsthistorisch Institut, where I worked on a project that combined literature and Renaissance architecture.

But just living in Italy is such a rich experience that several times I found myself dangerously close to a catatonic state, brought on by what is called the “Stendhal syndrome”: a temporary psychic disorientation brought on by over-stimulation, seen especially in tourists who overdose on treasure-filled cities like Florence. With restraint, I was able to stay out of the mental wards and enjoy Florence’s glories (medicine and dentistry, of which I had a little experience, not being among them). I resided in the city’s medieval sector, a living museum of a neighborhood. In addition, there were friends who introduced me to Florentine life, my Italian being then good enough to allow me to take full advantage of these contacts. In all, living in Florence was a rewarding academic and personal experience, one that had a considerable impact on my teaching for the rest of my years at Grand Valley.

Indeed, I was so inspired by my Florence experience that I finally decided to throw caution to the wind and complete a Fulbright application. For years I had received Fulbright announcements, read them like seed catalogues in winter, but was put off by the whole application process. (Perhaps, more truthfully, I had little hope the Council for International Exchange of Scholars would be interested in someone with my checkered career.) But in 1989 I took the plunge and applied for a lectureship in Morocco, which I chose because 1) it required someone with my skills and credentials; 2) it was a one-semester lectureship, which was as much as I was

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willing to gamble; and 3) it seemed exotic enough to produce only modest competition. When I was offered the post, I thought of those lost opportunities and wondered why I had taken so long to apply.

As it turned out, I did the Moroccan Fulbright twice: the first I started in the winter of 1991, shortly before the Gulf War erupted; but before I got very far with teaching, I was sent home, along with all State Department employees deemed non-essential. By the time the war was over, it was too late to return, so I waited until the following winter to complete the lectureship.

Attached primarily to Moulay Ismail University in Meknes, I also lectured in Fès, Rabat, Casablanca, Tangier, and Marrakesh. In addition, I presented papers at two language and literature conferences, edited several chapters of a linguistic text for North African university students, directed a few M.A. students in their thesis work, and even lectured on civil rights and civil liberties for the American Information Service in Rabat. It was a varied academic experience indeed.

At Moulay Ismail, my assignment turned out to be quite different from what I had been told to plan for. I had applied for a lectureship in linguistics and American literature; but I spent the winter teaching a faculty seminar to assist members of the department in either completing their Ph.D. requirements or in motivating them to begin a Ph.D. degree program. For selfish reasons, I insisted on teaching undergraduates as well; such pedagogic earnestness my colleagues found quaint.

In the end, the faculty seminar was certainly my most successful accomplishment. Five seminar colleagues are now working on Ph.D.'s in the U.S. and Canada. They tell me that this results from our work together, which gave them the confidence and motivation to undertake a Ph.D. One colleague has even selected me as co-director of his thesis at Indiana University (I wonder what they make of that at I.U.).

As for the undergraduates, the two courses I taught were, from their perspective, mere decoration, since I would not be their examiner in May/June. Moroccan education—higher and lower—is built on the French model, with everything riding on the final exam, so only the examiner's lectures are taken seriously. Thus, my students had no "academic" reason to pay attention to me, and though they came to class—perhaps enjoying the different approach to the subject matter and even finding me entertaining—when the time came to turn their attention to exams, they politely "fired" me. They simply announced they no longer had time for me and would not be coming to class. Honest enough.

Overall, my Moroccan experiences were happy ones, though I never felt I truly understood Berber-Arab thinking. But exposure to such a different culture was enriching, and as I continue to read North African fiction I am constantly reminded of my own limitations as someone from the West in what looks like Europe but is in fact only superficially European. Though I am regularly invited back to present papers at language and literature conferences, my contacts with Morocco are now limited to correspondents. Some of it is on InterNet, with colleagues studying at North American universities, but most of it is through the mail, since the Moroccan government has not opened InterNet access to academics—or anyone else, for that matter. Perhaps some day Morocco working menace of its Musl...
My adventures in overseas working and living really went into high gear after I retired from GVSU, for then I could spend winters wherever I wished, sometimes teaching, sometimes not. And so far they have found me in Nice, Morocco, San Francisco, London, and, this year, back in Italy. As I said at the outset of this account, I am presently enjoying another cross-cultural experience as a guest lecturer at the University of Perugia, where I have been warmly received by both students and faculty. Lecturing on topics from linguistics to modern American fiction—which includes giving a senior seminar on Othello—has inspired me to apply for another Fulbright lectureship. Or perhaps next year I’ll simply go to some other part of this intriguing globe. For me it has been a fruitful odyssey, one I recommend to GVSU colleagues. Study the many overseas opportunities and take a hand; you’ll meet interesting people and enrich both yourself and your teaching. A perfect combination.

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