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English 340

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When one was young, said Peter, one was too much excited to know people. Now that one was old, fifty-two to be precise (Sally was fifty-five, in body, she said, but her heart was like a girl's of twenty); now that one was mature then, said Peter, one could watch, one could understand, and one did not lose the power of feeling, he said. No, that is true, said Sally. She felt more deeply, more passionately, every year. It increased, he said, alas, perhaps, but one should be glad of it – it went on increasing in his experience.

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For there she was.

The Rosetta Stone was one of the first history lessons I can properly remember. It was second grade – that year was ancient Egyptian history, splashing upward into Mesopotamia. I remember a handout, a basic explanation – that it was inscribed with the same message in three different languages, and so was revolutionary in understanding the language and therefore the culture of the people that used to live there. We only spent one day on the Stone – after all, this is a good Protestant school, and the artifact is only mildly relevant to extrapolating what life was like in “biblical times” largely from the text of the Bible itself. We had the path of some Israelites to follow.

I thought very little of it at the time; after all, what does one think of in second grade? Invented versions of various card and board games several times more interesting than the actual rules. Playground crushes, computer time, LEGO sets as a reward for good report cards. I barely even emotionally registered that we had moved three states north the summer before the Rosetta Stone entered my life. The discoveries to come – toxic relationships, the internet, Björk's voice, caffeine and sleep deprivation, fluidity of sexuality and gender, people of races and creeds

different from my own, Borges and Debussy, Cage and Cowell – had yet to breach the horizon.

It was the knowledge of all those things and many more besides that propelled me into tears before the Rosetta Stone, after more than a decade in which it had not once crossed my mind. Circumstance, construction of self, and perception all require time to form and individuate. Second-grade me would have glanced at the Rosetta Stone for a few seconds and lolled off, likely with parents in tow scolding me for not understanding (really, for not feeling) the significance of what I saw. But how could I? Second-grade me would not have chosen (indeed, would not have been allowed the choice) to stay awake through the entire flight across the Atlantic; nor could I have understood most of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, the novel 21-year-old me devoured during that flight, a science fiction tale of future societies digging artifacts from the rubble left behind by our destruction and grossly misinterpreting them. Second-grade me, carefully wrapped by parents, teachers, and clergy in a single homogenous worldview, would not be constantly anxious about ideological and communicative barriers while traveling between two countries actively ripping themselves apart. And second-grade me would not have been expected to know that the Rosetta Stone resided in the British Museum – I would be told it was there immediately, and taken to see it within an hour of entry, rather than running blindly into it half an hour before it was time to leave.

Circumstance, construction of self, perception. A car does not backfire and a plane does not write advertisements in the sky for the sake of Clarissa Dalloway or Septimus Smith. The boys of “An Encounter” allow their yet uncalcified identities to be filled by adventure stories and mob psychology. The player piano seems to clatter mockingly at Ossipon from its place by the

doorway. Circumstance, construction of self, perception. Second-grade me is restless and bored; 21-year-old me is exhausted and impressionable. Second-grade me has little reason to prize unity, knowledge, and human capability; 21-year-old me has come to crave all three. Second-grade me sees a rock with scratches in it, a piece of abstract history that looks just like it did on the handout; 21-year-old me sees threads spiraling back across thousands of years of time, plus the incredible amount of care and effort that went into establishing those threads, and feels unable to do anything but weep.

This is what the Modernists have taught, or at least clarified, for me. That what I feel, that what is important to me, and that how I react is as much or more a function of myself as it is my scene. Perhaps this is fundamental, basic, though it is not to me. I raise all this personal history because through it I was wired against these ideas – I was wired to see reality as objective and my own actions as predestined and divided into sin (my fault) and good works (the result of God working in me, and therefore not really my doing). My teachers often railed against modernism or some poorly understood simulacrum of it as corrupt, worldly, relativistic. The woman who taught visual art considered Impressionism and anything beyond it anathema, as it shifted focus “to man” and “away from God”, as if man's capacity for perception was not one of God's most profound, intricate, and ingenious masterworks of creation. Modernism places an incredible value on the individual human being: it explores how their unique perception shapes the world around them, and fears for their erasure within the vastness of the city or the cosmos. And in the cosmic sense, the Rosetta Stone really is just a scratched rock; appreciation for how it was and is perceived, by both its creators and interpreters, is the key to knowing its true power.