

OH, THAT »IMPORTANCE OF BEING ENGLISH«...

(I'm just slightly paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, who was, nonetheless, an Irish author, which, on the other hand, didn't stop him from becoming one of the most profound experts on the supposedly definite traits of English or American national character, as well as from being my favourite writer and poet in the wide sphere of English language.)

First, let me say, what this humble article IS NOT going to be about: here, I certainly have no intention of plunging deeply into a treatise about subtle delineations of English national identity, where it starts and where it ends, or whom does it include/exclude. Rather, I should leave the tricky question to the anthropologists or philosophers, or any similar kind of theorists.

Now, instead of all the above, I shall prefer walking the thin line between stereotypes and truths, jokes and seriousness of the elusive concept what, if anything at all, qualifies someone as being English. To that end, I will partly refer to some loose internet survey that, subsequently, I'll try to combine with my personal experience on the matter.

From that point, I can only hope that any prospective readers will find my writing experiment at least remotely amusing. Although I'm afraid that from what I've written so far, the amusing part might get a little complicated. But anyway, it is the subject that I adore very much and am gently committed to it. So, actually, to say it shortly and brutally, I don't really care what anyone might think about it (possible mistakes included).

Well, let's start then, finally. But not at the beginning, it's too conventional, let's commence at the end! For instance, let's see what happened to the UK at this year's covid stricken Eurovision song contest. It's quite known, for many years, that the islanders are not very popular among the rest of the European audience. However, this year (2021) their unpopularity has reached somewhat a peak: this year, the song from the UK was the only one with absolutely zero points (i.e. they didn't get any from the expert jury nor any from televoting). Furthermore, first three places were taken by performers that didn't sing in English language.

Nevertheless, can you really blame the inhabitants of the Old Continent for such an obvious indifference to those self-righteous, contemptuous British/English performers, famously renown for their complete obscurity, at least until they got their one-time chance to appear on the Eurovision stage? Still, there they were, along with their classical 'stiff upper lip' posture, simply laughing away any sense of defeat, as though it would never have happened in front of thousands of spectators.

The story behind it is fairly simple, yet no less surprising. Especially, if you think about the events of the past few years, when the rest of Europe was just silently (and astonishingly) participating in what has been yet another display of English exceptionalism. I'm talking of Brexit, of course. An event that has had a frightening degree of similarity to my first encounter with my beloved England (1998), when I gradually and painfully learned that, for the most English people, Europe begins somewhere in France, way beyond the horizon of phenomena they would actually consider important.

Naturally, I was more than surprised. Anyway, then I slowly realised what it was all about: I had found myself entering 'The Land of Hope and Glory', the country with more than thousand-year old royal and imperial tradition that had once ruled a quarter of the world and possessed the largest Empire the world has ever seen.

Certainly, THAT WAS, IS AND HAS BEEN THE REASON ENOUGH why all things in England have to be (at least implicitly) different than anywhere else: for instance, you don't drink coffee, you drink tea as response to every life crisis, from toothache to divorce; you don't drive on the right but on the left, because back in the Middle Ages it was considered chivalrous to greet your opponent with the right hand; you, honestly, get a proper meal at breakfast and dinner, but almost nothing in between when you're expected to work; you develop your notion of politeness almost to the state of art, presumably because that's how you conquered hearts and nations – your language thus becoming the 'lingua franca' all around the world.

Yet, there exists, perhaps, an even grimmer side to the problem: in England, you almost never say what you actually think – or have a thousand ways of saying it, which makes the communication with (generally ignorant) foreigners even more difficult than it already is. For example, back then, in my age of innocence, I remember taking a simple greeting 'See you later' for granted, wondering why that 'later' in the sentence finally never occurred. So, instead of openly declining anything (which is perceived as being extremely rude), you better make up dozen reasons why you can't or wouldn't do it. You also do not make any unnecessary eye contact(s) with strangers (it may be perceived as an act of aggression), or speak too loudly (because then you're definitely not English but more likely an European barbarian).

Be as it may, once you get used to it, you start noticing the subtle variations in the manner of spoken language (British English) which henceforth help you navigate through the terrifying maze of English (British) culture.

And, in the end, believe it or not, I SUCCEEDED (at least in general, I assume). To my (and everybody else's) surprise, the very instant it happened, I fell in love with it. I fell in love with it HEAD OVER HEELS: I love the peculiarity of English food, that lovely tune of spoken (British) English language, the monarchy, I even like the rain and whimsical weather, the fog in the mornings... That's why the ability to talk at length about the weather is very much appreciated.

Finally, let me conclude with another of Oscar Wilde's brilliant quotes: 'To many, no doubt, he will seem blatant and bumptious, but we prefer to regard him as being simply British.' – After all, as it happens to be the point of so many subjective beliefs – THAT'S FOR ME TO LIKE AND FOR YOU TO FIND OUT!

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