

## INTERIOR BORDERS

Elena Gavagnin

*To You.*

*STRANGER! if you, passing, meet me, and desire to  
speak to me, why should you not speak to me?  
And why should I not speak to you?*

(Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1860)

I decided to start my essay with the words of one of the giants of American literature (for sure, my favorite) because I think he really understood which is the deeply crucial action when you meet someone you don't know, a stranger: speaking. Saying something. He is (or she is) a stranger, you don't know him, and even worse, probably you do not even know his language. But despite all these considerations and fears: *WHY* shouldn't you speak to him? All the other questions are irrelevant, because the answers are obvious: Who? You. When? Now. Where? Here. But *WHY* shouldn't you speak to him? There is no acceptable answer, no matter the language, the mood, the facial expressions. Just start telling something.

And actually that is what everybody started doing as soon as arrived at I-House: What's your name? Where do you come from? What are you studying? We are so many, that I am still asking and answering to these questions.

Are we really strangers? Of course we were, and we are not, but I mean, are we really different? In my mind there is a storm of “yes”, “no”, “yes”, “no”, I can not tame.

Yes, we are different, you can see it in the faces, hair, languages, eating habits, sleeping habits, music taste, traditional holidays. You can see it on a map! We will all point to different small spots on a map, if you ask where do we come from. So is it all due to a geometrical distance on a map? Maybe the different colors which the different countries are denoted with on a globe, persuaded us that we are different, arising our interior borders? And I think interior borders have more security checks to pass through than any other airport. The demonstration is that we are all here, so, cross a line on a globe can be difficult, but not so hard.

So maybe, no, we are not different, we are the same, it is just our superficial perception that makes everything seems stranger. Is it so easier to accept the others? Of course not! It will be a lie telling: we were wrong, we are the same, and now everything's easy.

The very big achievement is just understanding that the borders are inside us, because this would imply that we do not have to change the world, but we should just change ourselves.

The experience we are doing here, staying in a foreign country, together with all others foreign countries, is an extraordinary experience, that most people cannot experiment. And it is exactly the kind of strong experience that can really change a person, in his deeply believes.

The unique opportunity that I-House offers is to have all the world in the same place at the same moment.

You don't need trains, cars or planes to travel, you just have to do the stairs and rest in the Great Hall, and you are there, *in* the world.

Consider how it is difficult to have all the country leaders sitting at the same table to discuss of world issues, and now think about how it is easy to sit at the same table with people of ten different

countries in the Dining Hall? And you can do it all the days, all the year! It like a dreamy-leaders-global-meeting one year long! It is something will never happen to them!

The only little detail is that we are not the country leaders. But actually we are even better: we are the future! And since this, we can determine the future of our countries! I don't know how many leaders have had a similar experience, maybe the world would be different, would be better.

But this experience is unique not only because we know people from other countries but also because we know people from *our own* country. It could seem not so strange, since, obviously, in *your own* country you meet a lot of people from *your own* country. But you usually do not meet them outside of it.

I am italian, and of course I was italian also before coming here, but now when I say *I am italian* there is a different sense of consciousness. It could seem a paradox but I think I really meet my country here, for the first time.

So far I have always been overwhelmed by the stereotyped images of my country (pizza, pasta, arts, crime, scandals... should sound familiar), and honestly I have never appreciate so much my own country, not even people who live there.

But then here something happened.

It is not magic, it is just realizing everyday that *you are representing your country*, and it is not your country that is representing you!

And you are responsible of how you want your country to be. Being embarrassed of your country is a childish behavior, as a teen who feels embarrassed of introducing his parents to friends.

You are not slave of your country errors, you are son of your country prides...and you can try to fix the errors!

You understand your roots are what make you so special, and different from the others! But this time it is not a border, a wall that you are building: this time difference is richness!

You have to be proud of your difference and share it with others, not consider it a good reason to stay alone.

*Difference* is not a good excuse to not speak to the stranger.