



## THE LESS SAID, THE BETTER, VISKOVITZ

Our leader, who was also our teacher, always said to us, "You can tell a well-behaved fish by his language. He is never vulgar, he always looks you straight in at least one eye and, above all, he always tells the truth."

He was telling us this as he swam along his complex route, alternating the rhythm of the strokes of his tail and of his dorsal fin, because dance is the only way in which most fish can communicate. A language ill adapted to those who are impatient or short of breath. He would then catch my eye and inevitably add, "Viskovitz, repeat what I just said."

### *The Less Said, the Better, Viskovitz*

I would answer that question with silence. Life had already taught me that silence is the only way a fish can tell the truth and tell it politely. And I was a well behaved fish. I'll try to explain myself better.

If, to say the word "hydroelectric," you have to rise and sink in the water six times and touch your anal fin with a gill, it is ichthyologically impossible to keep looking at your interlocutor. Moreover, there is little likelihood that the meaning of your movements will be understood by him. Perhaps he will take them to mean "eel" and be offended. It's nobody's fault, it's the fault of language, and it is thence all the problems of us fish arise. Take my name—Viskovitz. It requires approximately ten minutes to pronounce it correctly. Eventually I used it as an exercise to lose weight. And there was also this: it could be mistaken for "Certainly, if it's okay with your cousin," or "Kiss me all over, nymph," or even something like "A mathematical series is perfect when each term is the limit of a progression or of a regression and each progression and regression contained in the series has a limit within the series itself."

The confusion is increased by the fact that there are as many languages as there are schools of fish and as many dialects as there are fish. That not only makes it difficult to speak but equally difficult to be silent. Even a simple act like swallowing a cuttlefish could be misunderstood; someone could see it as a metaphor. In some cultures the black ink of the cuttlefish represents "evil," "deceit," "the

illusoriness of life." The cuttlebone, on the other hand, "soul" or "purity." That's why I only eat herring and prefer to chew them far from a crowd.

At the root of all the fragmentation that characterizes ocean life is the difficulty of teaching language to a fish. I'll explain myself better. If you point with your mouth at a sole and then with your body draw an "S" in the water, your pupil will usually understand that "S" means sole. You can do the same with a herring, gudgeon or a spiny lantern fish. But try to use the same system to explain to that fish the concept of "incommensurability" or "classicalness" or simply "truth." The fish will swear that he gets it, but you can be sure that he understands something quite different, like "low tide," "diver" or "tiny bubbles."

My kids always asked me, "Papa, how are fish born?"

To that question I replied with silence. There are those who pride themselves on finding the right words in those delicate situations and on being able to speak in a natural tone of voice. Easier done than said.

I mean I wasn't even dreaming of explaining certain things—it would have taken months. I simply picked the first female in heat who happened along and showed the kids how it's done, even though I already had a large family. Because among fish, at least among us sticklebacks, sex is never embarrassingly intimate or daring. The female lays eggs in the nest, and the male fertilizes them

without even touching her. It is enough for him to look at her color and to delight in the little dance she does for him. Actually it's not even necessary for there to be a female. Studies conducted by humans have demonstrated that her image on a cardboard cutout is enough to get a male to fertilize the eggs. Even if the eggs aren't really there. Not only that—we continue to incubate the non-existent eggs and oxygenate them with our tails. This doesn't mean we're stupid, mind you. It means that nature prefers to err on the side of plenty rather than on the side of scarcity. If sex and reproduction didn't respond to an innate language and were left to the misunderstandings of fish language, fish would think that you're talking about Cuban dances, or I don't know what. Naturally there are extreme cases, like that of Zucotic, who has given names and an extensive education to those nonexistent fish. But that is truly a case at the far end of the spectrum.

In any case, a good rule with one's own children is to communicate as little as possible, limiting oneself to simple precepts such as "Don't say vulgar things—it's easier to just do them." Or "Don't make up lies—you might accidentally tell the truth." Or "Never say, 'Look out, friend, it's a hook'—it's easier to find a new friend."

My female companion had the bad habit of asking, "Do you love me, Viskovitz?"

To that question I replied with silence.

Because you're never sure if that is even the question. If whoever is asking it is a walrus or a polyp, you can rule

out love because of the context. But even if the speaker is a mother of your children, you're better off not getting involved in a precise answer, because if whoever has coupled with you is someone who comes from another school, "love" for her surely means something different, like "scratch my swim bladder" or I don't know what. Conversely, if she asks you to scratch her swim bladder, she may actually want a lot more from you, and you're better off not assuming that responsibility.

Take for instance my first wife, Lara. She came from another atoll, and when I met her she didn't even know what I meant if I said "sardine." So I had to teach her everything, starting with concepts like "good" and "bad," "fish" and "crustacean." After which I proceeded to more recent idiomatic usages and to archaic expressions that retained a certain poetic value. One day after a year of marriage, just to make conversation, I tossed out, "There's a certain guy in our school, Zucotic, who suffers from sea-sickness. What do you think of that?"

And she: "Yoga lessons? No, I don't think they'd do you any good."

Perplexed, I tried to change the subject, hazarding an innocuous "It's a bit cool this evening, dear."

And she: "Caviar? No, I'm against abortion."

Then I understood that our whole love story had been a misunderstanding. At last I had an explanation for those many looks charged with hate, and others with bursts of love. And for that strange story of the grandfather who

escaped from a sardine tin. I decided it would be better for us to separate, and to avoid further misunderstandings, I moved to a different ocean.

Then I got fished out and ended up in an aquarium. It was only there that things began to go better. It was there that I met my last wife, Ljuba, the most understanding of my female companions, the least ambiguous. At first we had our difficulties: her perfect beauty made me a little insecure, kept me in awe of her. Then, thanks to her patience, we overcame them. With time we worked out our perfect code of communication, made up of small gestures and long pauses.

I remember the day she opened her soul to me. I'd come up to her with a pirouette, as if to say, "I caress you with my mind. What deep enchantment binds me to you? I put my faith in your bewitching scales, I find in your tuna profile the secret of infinite sweetness." She answered me with a languid and imperceptible movement of her tail, which could mean many things, but which I interpreted as "Never hold back, my love. My existence doesn't enjoy peace but rather sexual ravaging and freedom from all conventions." So then I did something rare for a fish—I kissed her.

From that day, from that moment when I understood she was a cardboard cutout, our relationship became more serene, communication less burdensome and the sex fantastic.