

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THINKING

A week before last Christmas, in the early evening, I sat down at my desk to answer a letter. But, just as I was about to write the first words, I felt as if they were escaping me, vanishing into air before reaching the paper. I was surprised but not concerned. I decided that I was very tired, and promised myself to stop work after finishing the note. Trying to concentrate harder, I attempted to form in my mind the sentence I was supposed to write. However, while I knew the gist of what I wanted to say, the sentence would not take shape in my mind. The words rebelled, refused to do as I asked them; unlike Humpty Dumpty, who tells Alice that when using words, "the question is which is to be the master -- that's all," I felt too weak to give the elusive words orders they would be constrained to follow. At last, after much mental strain, I managed, painfully, to string a few words together and set them down more or less coherently on the page. I felt as if I had been groping in an alphabet soup for the words I needed but, as soon as I put in my spoon to grab a few, they would dissolve into meaningless fragments. I went back into the house and tried to tell my partner that something was wrong, but I discovered that I was unable to mouth the words, except in a painfully protracted stutter. He called the ambulance and an hour later I was in emergency being treated for a stroke.

To prove to myself that I had not lost the capacity of remembering words, only that of expressing them out loud, I began to recite in my head bits of literature I knew by heart. Thankfully, the flow was easy: poems by Saint John of the Cross and Edgar Allan Poe, chunks of Dante and Victor Hugo, doggerel by Arturo Capdevila and Gustav Schwab echoed clearly in the darkness of my hospital room. The ability to read

never left me and, a few hours later, I found that I was again able to write. However, whenever I tried to speak to the nurses, the stammer persisted. Only after four or five weeks of hesitant speech, it gradually disappeared.

The experience, while terrifying, made me reflect on the relationship between thought and language. If thought, as I believe, forms itself in our mind by means of words, then, in the first fraction of a second, when the thought is sparked, the words which instantaneously cluster around it, like barnacles, are not clearly distinguishable to the mind's eye: they constitute the thought only *in potentia*, a shape underwater, present but not fully detailed. When a thought is caused to emerge in the language of the speaker (and each language produces particular thoughts which can only be imperfectly translated into another language), the mind selects the most adequate words in that specific language, to allow the thought to become intelligible, as if the words were metal shavings gathering around the magnet of thought.

A blood clot in one of the arteries that feeds my brain had blocked for a few minutes the passage of oxygen. As a consequence, some of my brain's neural passages were cut off and died, presumably one dedicated to transmitting electric impulses that turn words conceived into words spoken. Unable to go from the act of thinking to its expression, I felt as if I were groping in the dark for something that crumbled at the touch, preventing my thought to form itself in a sentence, as if its shape (to carry on with my image) had been demagnetized and were no longer capable of attracting the words supposed to define it.

This left me with a question: what is this thought that has not yet achieved its verbal state of maturity? This, I suppose, is what Dante meant when he wrote that "my mind was struck/ by lightning bringing me what it wished": the desired thought not yet expressed in words. Under normal circumstances, the progress from the conception of a thought in the specific linguistic field of the thinker to its verbal constellation, and on to its expression in speech or in writing, is instantaneous. We don't perceive the stages of the process, except in half-dreams and hallucinatory states (I experienced this when, in my twenties, I experimented with LSD).

Faced with the inability to put my thoughts into words, I tried to find synonyms for what I knew I was trying to say. Again, a simile might help: it was as if, travelling down a stream, I had come to a damn that blocked my way and sought to find a side canal to allow my passage. For instance, in the hospital, discovering that it was impossible to say "my reflective functions are fine, but I find speaking difficult", I managed to blurt out to the doctor: "I have words."

I experienced the expression of negatives as especially difficult. In my slowed-down mental process, if I wanted to say, in answer to the nurse's question, "I don't feel pain", I found myself thinking "I feel pain" and adding "no" to the affirmative sentence. Accustomed to my normal rhythm of speech, I would try to answer at once, but the words would come out as "of course" or "yes" before I had time to frame my thought in the appropriate negative. It seems that in my mind, the stage of affirmation precedes that of negation.

Perhaps, I said to myself afterwards, this is how one's literary style works: selectively finding the right waterway, not because of any blockage of the verbal expression but because of a particular aesthetic sense that chooses not to take the commonplace main course ("the cat is on the mat") but a personal side canal ("the cat slumbers on the mat"). After you break a leg, you are more conscious of the act of walking.

Lying in the hospital, allowing my brain to be scanned in coffin-like machines, I reflected on the fact that our age has allowed our curiosity that which medieval theologians believed impossible except for God: the observation of our observing, drawing a chart of our own thinking, enjoying the privilege to be both audience and performer of our intimate mental acts: holding, as it were, our soul in our hands.

Now, after my stroke, I try to follow myself thinking as I write, to make myself aware of the path my thoughts travel before transforming themselves into words on the page. I try, but it's all too quick. My thoughts outwit me.

Alberto Manguel