THE TEARS OF ISAAC

Several decades ago, I found myself in the Tassili region of the Algerian desert, close to the oasis of Djanet. I had gone there to visit the prehistoric caves painted with images of animals and humans: giraffes and bison, crocodiles and rhinoceros, hunters and dancers, and strange anthropomorphic figures with the heads of one-eyed Cyclops. They had been painted some nine or ten thousand years ago, when the Sahara was still green.

It is impossible to look upon these images and not see in them tales of adventure, depictions of mysterious rites, pictures of a social life of which we know nothing except that which these memorable snippets grant us, and which we, by imaginative means, translate into our scarce personal experience. What can we possibly know, from the distance of the twenty-first century, of the labours, fear and courage of those remote and talented elders? These human figures, small and large: are they parents instructing their young in the arts of hunting, in shamanic dancing, in the social codes of the tribe to which they belong? Are they teaching these ancient children the names the things of the world they are beginning to discover, of plants and stars, birds and beasts? Perhaps in these primordial scenes lie the seeds of the magical episode told in the Book of Genesis, in which God, like a pedagogically-minded parent, takes young Adam to meet the creatures recently brought to life to see what he would call them, "and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” Perhaps these first rituals were rituals of the word.

Accurately or not, there is something that we rescue, a story that we reconstruct based on these iconographic alms granted us by the Tassili walls. Driven by the narrative impulse that defines our species, and by the imaginative urge to understand our world, a certain truth is born from our reading of what certainly is a system of signs whose grammar we have forgotten.

The culture of language is a much more recent invention. Both in Greece and in Rumania, in the mid-nineteen-sixties, archaeologists uncovered a number of fragments of pottery and a few medals or amulets dating from the sixth millennium B.C.E., with inscriptions that have not yet been deciphered. One of these inscriptions looks like a capital D, and others are like small crosses and parallel lines scared by diagonal strokes. If these inscriptions are supposed to mean something, then these ancient bits and pieces are the earliest examples we have of written language: not of a full syntactic system but of merely a few isolated signs, a sort of first intuition of the astonishing act still to come.

The elaboration of a complete and coherent system of writing took place a couple of millennia later, somewhere in Mesopotamia. In the fourth millennium B.C.E., an inspired merchant was looking for a way of documenting a commercial transaction. Two clay tablets preserved until a few years ago at the Archeological Museum of Baghdad, each no bigger than the palm of a child's hand, carry the engraved depiction of an animal –a goat or sheep—as well as a small indentation made with the tip of the index finger that, historians guess, represents the number ten. With these tablets, the ancient merchant could be assured that anyone who knew the meaning of these signs, whether living far or near, at any moment present or future, could be a witness to the purchase (or sale) of

ten goats (or ten sheep). The importance of this action is beyond measure. With these few discreet signs, this anonymous genius did away once and for all with the two greatest obstacles which every human being must face --time and space-- and bequeathed us, the fortunate descendants, an almost limitless extension of the power of memory. With this early exteriorizing of the brain the invention of writing granted us a sort of modest immortality.

Writing is the art of materializing thought. It belongs to a group of arts related to the visualizing and transmission of ideas, emotions and intuitions. Writing, painting, reading are all part of this peculiar human activity born from the capacity to imagine the world in order to experience it. Darwinian biology teaches that the human species developed, in order to survive, the gift of imagination. Imagining something may have led to naming that something: that is to say, translating the visualized something into an equivalent of sound, so that the enunciation of the sound might conjure back the image of the thing like a witch's charm. In some societies, the sound was in turn given a material representation: markings in a handful of clay as those in Mesopotamia, notches in a piece of wood, designs on a polished stone, scribbles on a page. Experience of reality could now be encoded by the tongue or the hand, and decoded through the ear or the eye. Like an illusionist showing a flower in a box, then causing it to disappear, then bringing it back again in front of the public's astonished gaze, our ancestor made it possible for us to perform magic.

My first act of magic was also my only one, repeated after that single time, in identical fashion, again and again throughout the rest of my life. It took place when I was three or four years old. All of a sudden,

a shape displayed large on a billboard became the sound of a letter, and together with other shapes, the sound of a word. The word was followed by other words, so that, commanded out of nothingness, the promise of a story began to unfold before my eyes. Not only a story: the world itself and everything in it sprung from the shapes that my eyes transformed. I was a magician. I could read.

I belong to a society of the written word and, as every member of that society must (but not all do), I learned the code by which my fellow-citizens communicate. It could have been otherwise, of course. Not every society requires the visual encoding of its language: for many, sound is enough. The old Latin tag, *scripta manent, verba volant*, which we were taught meant that what is written endures but what is spoken vanishes, is obviously not true in oral societies, where the meaning of the dictum might be that what is written remains dead on the page, but what is said out loud has wings and flies. That is also the meaning I discovered as a reader: only when read do the written words come to life.

Nominalists have long held that only individual things are real. That is to say, things exist independently from the mind, and that words cannot refer to something real unless they refer to an individual thing. Realists, on the other hand, though they too maintain that we live in a world that exists independently from us and our thoughts, believe that there are certain kinds of things, universals, that don't owe their existence to the individuals of which they are attributes, but that can, like these individuals, be named with words. Literary language generously embraces the two beliefs and happily names both individuals and universals. Perhaps because in societies of the written word this faith in the syncretic power of language is less strong, its members rely instead

on the materialization of the word to affirm language's life-giving power. *Verba* are not enough, they need the *scripta*.

In 1976, the psychologist Julian Jaynes suggested that when language was first developed in humans, it manifested itself in aural hallucinations; that is to say, the words were generated by the right hemisphere of the brain but they were identified by the left as coming from somewhere in the world outside us. According to Jaynes, in the beginnings of language, we heard voices, voices which we perhaps attributed to communicative gods, and only in the first millennium B. C. did these voices become internalized. When writing was invented three millennia later, the deciphering of the first written signs may also have produced a hallucinatory experience of sound, so that the words read by the eyes acquired in the reading a physical presence in the ear, a second reality outside the mind that echoed or mirrored the primary reality of the written words.

Certainly the passage from spoken to written language was less an improvement in quality than a change in direction. Plato tells how the Egyptian god Thoth offered the Pharaoh the gift of language, and how the Pharaoh explained to the god that he was obliged to refuse it, because if people learned to write they would forget to remember. Plato no doubt knew, but fails to mention, because it does not suit his story, that thanks to writing, speakers would now be able to overcome the limitations imposed by time and space I mentioned earlier. They would not need to be present in order to deliver their speech and, across the centuries, the dead would be able to converse with the living. Less immediate, less corporeal, less reactive than the art of speech, the art of writing simultaneously strengthened and diminished the power of the wordsmith.

This, of course, is true of every contraption or tool –a pen, a chair or an iPhone- in whatever craft we employ it. Our instruments constantly alter and expand our human abilities, and the alteration of these abilities only ends with death. Chesterton defined a chair as a beast with four legs for a cripple with only two.

Either as the inspiration that led to the invention of writing, or as its consequence, the assumption that justifies the existence of writing as an instrument of thought is one of linguistic fatalism. Just as everything in the universe can be given a name to identify it, and every name can be expressed in a sound, every sound has its representation: nothing can be uttered that cannot be written down and read. Nothing: not even the word of God dictated to Moses, not even the songs of whales transcribed by biologists, not even the sound of silence notated by John Cage. Dante understood this law of material representation: in his Paradise, the souls of the blessed appear to him as faces emerging from a cloudy mirror, and gradually take on a clear and recognizable form. In fact, they have no corporeality since in Heaven there is neither space nor time, but they kindly assume visible features so that Dante can be witness to the experience of the life to come. The spirits themselves don't need Chesterton's crutches; we do.

We know little of the aesthetics of the Otherworld, but in our own, every instrument we create, and everything created by that instrument, is ruled by both an aesthetic and a utilitarian sense. Everything: when a school in Phnom Penh was transformed by the Khmer Rouge into a so-called security prison where more than 20,000 people were tortured and killed, the authorities decided that the colour of the building was not

aesthetically pleasing; the walls were therefore repainted in a soft tone of beige.

Written language, serving a variety of purposes and obeying a diversity of aesthetic norms, gradually sprang up almost everywhere in the world. Sumeria and Babylon, Egypt and Greece and Rome, China and India, developed their own scripts which in turn inspired those of other cultures: in South-East Asia, in Ethiopia and Sudan, among the Inuit people. In other regions of the globe, however, different methods were imagined to lend words material visibility. If in many parts of the world there is an art of writing that involves not penned or incised markings but other semantic signs such as strips of bamboo in Southern Sumatra, message sticks among the Australian aborigines, wreaths of twigs in the Torre Straits Islands, wampum belts among the Iroquois, wooden *lukasa* boards among the Luba people of Zaire-- then there must be something equivalent to an art of typography for each of these "other" forms, with its particular aesthetics and readability. These "typographies" may not be used in printing but they affect and shape the conveying of meaning through words, in much the same way as a Garamond or a Bodoni affects and shapes a text written in English or French, and lends it a certain significance. Wittgenstein's remark quoted by Professor Bates is much to the point. Let me repeat it: "I really do think with my pen, because my head often knows nothing of what my hand is doing." (This reminds me of what Borges said on becoming blind, that he would no loner write prose. Poetry yes, he said, because it came to him first as music, and to that music he would add words and then dictate them; but for prose, he said, he had to "see his hand write.")

The vocabulary that makes up a certain language, set down in writing in the cultures of the written word and affected by the way in which it is set down, is not merely, as we intuitively suppose, an instrument for our thoughts, but to a large extent determines and fashions those thoughts. I believe there is a certain universality in a number human perceptions and questions concerning ourselves and the world, in the elemental stories that (as folklorists tell us) are repeated, under many guises, from the North Pole to the South. And yet, the telling of these stories as well as their reception is very much determined by the language in which they are told and heard or read.

I was brought up by a German-speaking Czech nannie who taught me English with a German accent and German with a Czech accent. Later on I learned Spanish, French and some Italian. And from a very early age, I knew that fairy-tales read in German were not the same as those identical fairy-tales read in English or Spanish or French. The demeaning name Aschenputtel does not have the sparkling ring of Cinderella nor the banal one of Cenicienta. If Shakespeare had been born Spanish, he would never have thought up that most bandied-around quotation in the English language: “To be or not to be.” In Spanish you have to choose between the notion of mere existence and that of existing in a certain place and time. And unless our Spanish Shakespeare had been born deaf, he could never have written “Ser y estar, o no ser y no estar.” Because he was writing in Spanish, it took Calderón a full-length play to say what Shakespeare said in six short English words. In this lies and the glory and despair of the art of translation.

But beyond what a language allows us to tell, literature binds together all our knowledge of the world past, present and future, as a

love-bound volume that, as Dante says, “throughout the universe is scattered.”

From very early on, stories seemed to me clues to the identity of the society to which I belonged. To give only one example among thousands: I felt this, far away and long ago, on the summer afternoon when I descended with young Axel from Hamburg, through the mouth of the Sneffels volcano, deep into the centre of the Earth. There I was, with Jules Verne’s book in hand, accompanying the fearless adventurers to the far shore of the world, in a century that was not my own. Thanks to the story, I could strip myself of my conventional identity, of the name my parents had given me, of the date and place of birth stipulated in my passport, of every barrier except that which my timidity imposed on my curiosity. I knew intuitively that the thing that drove me was not a physical need like eating and breathing but something for which I didn’t have a name and which I now realize was that which we call desire: desire for that which had not yet happened, for that which lay beyond the horizon. Throughout the following years, this desire was to become an essential part of myself. Reading offered me the place of a privileged spectator, from which I could view the kingdom of this world and of every other world imaginable, more intimately and convincingly than by observing reality itself. When decades later I travelled to Iceland and found myself at the foot of Mount Sneffels, in spite of the majestic beauty of the volcano, I felt somewhat disappointed.

Throughout an adolescence that seems to me now to have lasted a lifetime, I began to understand that the characters in my books were like kaleidoscopic fragments of the changing person I met every morning in the mirror. The uncomfortable variations of size of the people

encountered by Captain Gulliver, the abominable insect in whom poor Gregor has to recognize himself, Kim's name that Kim must repeat in order not to forget who he is during the dark ceremony of initiation, the identity Odysseus chooses for himself when he tells the Cyclops that his name is Nobody -- these creatures and many more called out to me from the pages of my books. I felt that Alice, lost in the rabbit-hole into which she had fallen, echoed my existential anguish. Thinking that she might not be herself but someone else, silly Mabel for instance, she says to herself: "If I'm Mabel, I'll stay down here! It'll be no use their putting their heads down and saying "Come up again, dear!" I shall only look up and say "Who am I then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else." Like Alice, I didn't want to be Mabel. And my books gave me the generous possibility to be whoever else I wanted to be. The first person singular must always be conjugated in the plural.

Fray Luis de Granada, taking up a metaphor already commonplace in the sixteenth century, describes the world as a book written by God and "offered to all nations," and scolds us for acting "like children who, when a volume is set in front of them with a few illuminated letters of gold, delight in looking at them and playing with them, and do not read what they say nor take into account what they mean." The ancient metaphor folds over itself: books are worlds of paper and ink (or digital) in which we should be able to read our material reality. Unlike the book of God that, as Fray Luis warns us, contains a narrative too complex for our childish understanding, human books (that with becoming modesty don't aspire to contain the entire story of the universe but merely partial intuitions) offer us nevertheless a vast catalogue of identities among which we may be able to recognize our own.

This conviction guides me through my libraries. Page after page, volume after volume, consciously or not, I'm looking for that fluid person that, like the god Proteus, changes mind and body year after year and hour after hour. Magically, haphazardly I find this person in hundreds of my books. In the chapter before last of *Eugene Onegin*, the enamoured Tatiana visits the country house of the hero, absent since his duel with Lensky. Tatiana wanders through the library of her beloved and, in floods of tears, leafs through the pages of his books in search of "the true personality" of this man seemingly so cold and heartless. In his notes scribbled on the margins, in a cryptic word jotted down here or there, in a tick or a question mark, Tatiana believes she can discover the elusive image of the real Onegin, of the Onegin defined by his reading. Because Tatiana knows that for every reader, that reader's library is a kind of autobiography.

I agree with Tatiana. I recognize myself in Little Red Riding Hood and her civil disobedience, and not in the servile Cinderella; in the klutzy Dr Watson more than in the shrewd Sherlock Holmes; in Doctor Faustus rather than in Orestes; and now, in my final chapter, in King Lear and his fond and foolish old age, much as before I recognized myself in his impatient daughters. In these recognitions neither logic nor historical truth carry much weight. When Hamlet famously declares that death is "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns," I believe in the poetic truth of his words, even though I've witnessed, moments earlier, the appearance on stage of just such a traveller who has returned to tell his son to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder."

These numberless first persons singular make up the modest portrait of the reader I shall be upon reaching my last page. My readings form a monstrous cosmology of mirrors in which are present all the hours and all the places of my life, like that *nunc-stans* and *hic stans* that Hobbes found intolerable. Plato's *Republic* and *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, *The Idiot* and *Das Kapital*, *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Day of the Triffids* are individual chapters in an immense saga whose coherence and meaning I can only guess. The Bible, made up of fairy-tales, historical accounts, proverbs, lyrical poems, prophetic texts and legal codes is a celebrated example of this polymorphous literary genre, and also a further chapter of the voracious book that holds all my readings. In spite of such ambitious conceits, I'm painfully aware that even this vast volume certainly does not contain the universe itself.

All religions, perfectly aware that a dogma does not convince anyone, fulfill their evangelizing missions through the culture of language: through stories, fables and allegories. When I started reading the Bible in the King James version, some of these narratives entered easily my autobiographical library. I enjoyed the story of Jonas uselessly preaching to the cattle-like people of Nineveh; the Prodigal Son welcomed back with generous joy by his father; Christ kicking the merchants out of the Temple (gloriously illustrated by Giotto with Christ depicted as a boxer with a raised fist.) Others I found abominable. Above all, I felt indignant (I still feel indignant) at the story of Abraham and Isaac, and at God's unconscionable command that Abraham sacrifice his son. I don't care to be told that this is merely a test of Abraham's devotion, I don't care to be told that an angel is sent to stop Abraham's hand, and that the son is replaced with a sacrificial ram. Abraham is the emblematic father, the one who no doubt initiated his son in the rituals of

the tribe like his ancestors in the Tessali desert and, following the example of his god, perhaps told Isaac to name the animals he saw, in order to teach him the magical powers of language. The idea that a father might accept the divine command to slaughter his son seems to me at the root of the worst atrocities committed by the three religions that claim themselves heirs of Abraham. A god who demands such an act, even knowing that it won't be carried out and that it is commanded merely to put a man's obedience to the test, merits in my eyes neither veneration nor respect, and if that god were a character in a novel we'd judge him infamous, as we do Oedipus's father Laius, the drunk Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, the abusive Sorel senior in *Le Rouge et le noir*, King Basil in *Life is a Dream,* with so many others. Nor am I convinced by the ethnographic explanation that sees in the episode a legend regarding the end of human sacrifice among the desert tribes, and the beginning of other rites less bloody and more symbolic.

Michael Zellmann-Rohrer of Oxford University has translated a 1,500-year-old papyrus discovered near the pyramid of Pharaoh Senwosret I in 1934 by researchers from New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Zellmann-Rohrer said the "magical papyrus" describes the biblical story of the binding of Isaac, in which God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. As the story is told in the book of Genesis, God stopped Abraham from completing the sacrifice, but Zellmann-Rohrer said that in this text, written in Coptic, an Egyptian language that uses the Greek alphabet, the sacrifice was completed. Other known texts from antiquity relate the story in this way, Zellmann-Rohrer said. He also explained that the story had been copied onto the papyrus by multiple writers who were not likely to have been professional scribes. (Archeology, 18 April 2018)

As I see it, the paradox is this. We know that every piece of writing is a haphazard and ineffectual approximation to the chaotic tangle of knowledge, dreams, affects, thoughts and events present in every moment of our lives, without ever reproducing it faithfully. But we also know that, at times, that same haphazard quality can give us four of five words that seem to contain the universe itself.

The ancients believed that only a divine being could create works that exactly reproduce the things of reality. Plato, echoing Borges, taught that the only true creations were those of the natural world, and that poets and artists merely cobble together poor imitations of that *magnum opus*. The fourth commandment given to Moses forbids the making of "graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" because (Talmudic commentators say) on the Day of Judgment the artist will be summoned and told to bring his creation to life, and he'll find himself incapable of doing so. Dante, warning the reader again and again that he doesn't have the words to name many of the wonders he discovers in the worlds beyond, sees on the first ridge of Mount Purgatory images sculpted in marble "that would have made Nature itself burn with envy." The highest virtue of these divine works is their verisimilitude, their exact equivalence to things in the real world. A mere poet, even Dante, being human, can never reach this degree of perfection.

Saint Bernard, using an expression that Saint Augustine took from Plato, wrote that a sacred hymn, badly performed, belonged to the *regio dissimilitudinis*, the realm of dissimilitude that for Augustine corresponded to his own condition before his conversion, a realm in

which he felt dissimilar not only to God but also to his true self. Every reader, even the wisest and the keenest, never reaches a thorough understanding of the text; readers always find themselves, like Augustine, in a *regio dissimilitudinis* from which they can only catch fleeting glimpses of the full richness of a literary work. However, that blindness is also a virtue. Because of that dissimilitude between our reading of a text and the text itself, between our reading of the world and the world itself, in that twilight zone of dark mirrors and ambiguous gestures, readers are able to put into practice their creative powers. I learned early on that the art of reading consists in reading between the lines. As Professor Bates told us yesterday, "both the brain and the computer must avoid predetermined programmes."

To listen to words, to read and to write are our prerogatives. We don't know if nightingales tell each other their adventures in their songs, or whether the gestures of sea lions add elements of style to their common barking, but most scientists agree that the invention of stories is an art proper to the human condition. Lost in a universe from which our grammars and our sense of individuality and otherness are absent, and in which our primordial notions of time and space are invalid, from very early on our species began constructing a sort of imaginary parallel universe, like an architect's model or a cosmological chart where we give names to things and draw constellations of cause and effect, in an effort to lend meaning to the ineffable everything that surrounds us. Incapable of accepting that our brain cannot conceive the eleven dimensions of the universe, we have become cartographers of the inconceivable.

The late Stephen Hawking said in an interview: "I don't demand that a theory correspond to reality because I don't know what reality is.

Reality is not a quality you can test with litmus paper.” This is not, of course, an argument for alternative truths. For Hawking, reality existed, even though we don’t know what it is or have a theory that proves its existence. And yet, I believe there´s an alternative to this brave confession of cosmic ignorance. Perhaps the proof of reality lies in literature.

Some time ago, rummaging through the shelves of a New York public library, I found a fat anthology of Greek poetry edited by Peter Constantine and I started to leaf through it. On one of its pages, I discovered an anonymous sixteenth-century poem on the sacrifice of Abraham, translated into English by Karen Emmerich. It's a dialogue between the father and the son, and in its last lines, Isaac, seemingly accepting his fate, turns to Abraham and says:

> But father, since there is no sign of pity from above,
> since he who judges has judged thus,
> I ask you just one favour before I die:
> please don't cut my throat unfeelingly:
> embrace me gently and lovingly as you slay me
> so you can see my tears and hear my pleas.

This is what literature does. It allows us to tell, in the languages of our culture, our ancestral experience in as many ways as necessary, and enables us to read in those fictions, however imperfectly and obscurely, what we suspect to be the truth.

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