

# INTRODUCTION

## BESIDE THINKING

Sowon S. Park

*Oxford University*

### I

5

The most advanced teachings of the Buddha are said to have been conducted in silence. In the Zen world, this mode of communication is known as the ‘heart-to-heart transmission’ (以心傳心), a form of meditative practice that requires the banishment of all words from the mind. By abjuring language and, consequently, conscious thought, adherents believe that they can convey truths more profound than those that logical verbal discourse can express. So the lore goes.

It is unlikely that this mythic practice will carry much authority with our readers. For how would one know if the message has been received, if a ‘non-thought’ can be said to comprise something as concrete as a message at all? And where would one begin to assess the depth of the truths thus communicated, check the accuracy of the deductions, analyze the efficacy of the procedure, and test the reliability of the set-up? The transmission cannot be disproved and that would seem to be as much as intellectual inquiry can establish. But before one sweeps aside this putative interaction as pre-modern mysticism or ‘Eastern’ mumbo jumbo that science has eradicated, it might be remembered that it is not only the Zen master who subscribes to and has faith in mental processes beside thinking.

It takes but little reflection to note that in our everyday lives we engage in a vast range of non-verbal sense-making of the world of which we have little awareness. From gauging the weather to writing an essay to falling in love, we are all dimly conscious that what may appear as decisive thoughts and deliberate actions are in no small part maintained by the unrevealed mental processes that underlie them. Implicit cognition is also discernable in a wide range of deeply-rooted cultural practices. Dancers, actors and trapeze artists are, for example, just a few of the many

whose shared physical actions rely on non-declarative communication. Though it is difficult to articulate exactly what is being communicated and how, it is evident that both the mythic Zen transmissions and dizzying *Cirque du Soleil* acts rely upon certain 'non-thoughts' and the communication of these 'non-thoughts' as an integral part of their task.

However, since the implicit mental processes that lead up to, or conflict with, our conscious awareness are not verifiable or even directly knowable, there is immense difficulty in attempting to cover the range of these processes with any conceptual precision. We speak vaguely of having a gut instinct, a hunch, a premonition, an intuition, a 'sense' of things. This 'intolerable wrestle with words and meanings', as T.S. Eliot put it (23), about the unsaid and the unsayable has always been of great fascination to artists and writers, not least Henry James, whose major novels would unravel without the crucial unspoken messages that hold the epiphanic structure in place. Isabel's recognition of the role of Madame Merle in the piano scene in *The Portrait of a Lady*, for example, is all the more real for having been produced out of the unsaid.

If the processes of the mind that are not conscious have preoccupied writers and artists, scientists have mostly regarded them with indifference, maintaining what is not testable and falsifiable as an unsuitable topic of inquiry. However, in a strange turn of events, undeclared mental processes have become in the last thirty years a revived area of interest in a number of scientific fields. In psychology, the concern with mental processes besides rational thinking was well represented by Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow* (2011), which advanced the idea that the human mind processes information on two levels—by means of 'System 1', the intuitive, emotional and fast; and 'System 2', the rational, logical and slow. By drawing distinctions between intuitive and logical modes of thought, Kahneman successfully put rational thought on a par with what was customarily consigned to the Freudian unconscious. Before that Malcolm Gladwell popularized the idea of 'thin-slicing'—the unconscious and rapid processing of accumulated knowledge—in his bestselling *Blink* (2005), which went some way to support its subtitle: 'The Power of Thinking Without Thinking'. Meanwhile, in neuroscience, the role of the unconscious in the human mind has become the new frontier. New and ongoing discoveries in memory and perception demonstrate that very little of what goes on in the brain is actually conscious, restoring the validity of the unconscious to human cognition. As the Nobel laureate neuroscientist Eric Kandel writes, 'One of the most surprising insights to emerge from the modern study of states of consciousness is that Freud was right: unconscious mental processes pervade conscious thought; moreover, not all unconscious mental processes are the same' (Kandel 546).

Against this background, this special issue on 'Beside Thinking' considers the range of meanings of what it is to know without thinking and how this mode of unconscious cognition has functioned throughout literary history in various cultures, alongside, beyond and against thought. While the idea of an unconscious has been a central concept in literary studies since at least the nineteenth century, with

a great deal of specialized meaning accrued around it, there is still little agreement on what ‘not-thinking’ is. This special issue asks what the relation is between thought and ‘non-thought’, whatever its meaning, and discusses how thoughts define, regulate, and enable the concept of ‘non-thought’ in literature.

This theme was explored by the members of the Literary Theory Research Committee of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) under the title ‘The Art of Not-Thinking’ at the 2013 conference in Paris (19-20 July). The heading reflected John Zilcosky’s suggestion, based on his book in progress, *The Art of Not Thinking: Of Wrestling and Poetry*, made during the 2012 meeting. The current title was proposed by Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu. The aim of the workshop was stated thus:

There is an ancient antagonism between thinking and not-thinking, beginning with Socrates’ famous censure of the poet as an irrational being. The poet, on the other hand, knows that he, like the ancient athlete, precisely must not think in order to succeed. This tension between thinking and not thinking has extended over time, reappearing especially clearly in the conflict between Enlightenment reason and Romantic irrationality. However, there is great instability surrounding these two terms: the Romantic poet cannot help but think, and the Enlightenment philosopher is plagued by the “bad habit” of absentmindedness. This coincidence between thought and the absence of mind then recurs in the Freudian unconscious, where reason sleeps yet the mind is active. This workshop will investigate how not-thinking functions throughout history and in various cultures as a disruptive mode at once within and beyond thought.

7

Thirteen papers were presented at the meeting in Paris, over two days, considering a wide spectrum of positions on ‘The Art of Not-Thinking.’ And the six papers collected in this issue reflect the diversity of interests demonstrated at the workshop as well as the feedback from the lively discussion generated by a not inconsiderable gathering. A forum essay has been written especially for the special issue by Terry Eagleton.

## II

Implicit processes of the mind have never been more prominent than when set against Reason. But often such pairing resulted in an indiscriminate traducement of the unconscious as superstition or irrationality. In different ways, all the pieces here reject the standard divide between the rational and the inexplicable. We begin with Terry Eagleton’s ‘The Body as Language’, which suggests that implicit cognition and various modes of non-verbal interaction have always been an in-built part of the social human body. Sharply critical of pure rationalism within which knowledge is strictly defined along Cartesian lines, Eagleton considers the conflict between Enlightenment reason and other modes of cognition and recasts the concept of pure rationality as that which is carved from bodily matter. As he writes: ‘We need, in

short, to re-capture the truth that human rationality is an animal rationality. Reason is not where we are least animal, but where we are most so. A rationality which does not ground itself in our sensory life is not simply an incomplete form of reason; it is not authentically rational at all.' In thinking of the body as a common form of human practice, as a *language*, Eagleton effectively exposes the reification of body and soul; rationality and instinct; and thought and non-thought prevalent in our 'dogmatically culturalist days'.

Continuing the bodily thread is John Zilcosky's 'Von der Überlegung: Of Wrestling and (Not) Thinking', which ponders 'the violence and ecstasy of bodies that refuse to be separated'. Noting the simultaneous staging in ancient Greece of poetry and wrestling competitions and taking as his starting point Socrates' dichotomy between thinking and not-thinking, Zilcosky traces the tension between the two spheres from Socrates to Heinrich von Kleist's *Von der Überlegung* (1810). He maintains that there is an ineluctable entanglement of not-thinking with pure thinking in the western tradition and by drawing out Kleist's disentangling of the 'knotted' history of non-thought, questions 'Socrates' own paradoxical attempt to invent, on the back of agonistic bodies, a form of thinking that was divorced from these very bodies.'

The next paper also considers the classical origins of the issue of thought and non-thought in western culture, as well as its historical development. Going back to the ancient antagonism between thinking and not-thinking, Péter Hadju's 'The Mad Poet in Horace's *Ars Poetica*' examines 'poetic madness' as a topic where poetic inspiration, poetic achievement and the poet's role in society interconnect, casting a fresh light on the dynamic between thinking and not-thinking. Delineating representations of poetic madness in Horace, Hadju considers the question 'Does the desperate "mad poet" behave this way because he does not think? Or does he have a plan in his eagerness for listeners and fame?'

The sphere of the instinctive is framed by the paralogical in the next essay, by Marko Juvan. In 'Doing Literature without Thinking: Paralogical Devices and the Literary Field', Juvan weaves the literary tradition of non-thought, from the ancient Greeks to the present, into a theoretical frame of the paralogical through his concept of the 'art of mania' as they manifest themselves in Alexander S. Pushkin's *The Prophet* (1828), the Slovenian poet Dane Zajc's *Lump of Ashes* (1961), and the Polish modernist Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz's *Narcotics* (1932). Giving voice to the robust yet isolated expressions of 'non-thoughts', Juvan calls for 'literary actors, media, and institutions to produce, distribute, and consume singularities of imaginative texts, evocations of the unspeakable, and the elusiveness of poetic signification by implanting them in chains of conceptions, acts, and texts that—operating rationally and with much thinking—constantly produce and reproduce the meanings of all that that seems to be created without or beside thinking.'

The implications of these two essays' concern with the tradition of unconscious cognition in western culture are extended to the political realm in Takayuki Yokota-Murakami's 'Thought Censorship under Totalitarianism: A Precarious Relationship

between Thought and Voice in Mandelstam.’ This essay discusses the interdependence of thought and non-thought by examining the works and the biography of the poet Mandelstam, a victim of the Great Terror, and more specifically, Soviet ‘brain-washing’. Yokota-Murakami investigates the role of language in the formulation of thought and non-thought through a close examination of the works of Mandelstam as well as the Vygotskian theory of thought and speech. In contrast to Vygotsky’s standpoint that inner thought and speech are not separate but ‘mutually mediating’, the essay places Mandelstam’s faith in and commitment to language, which resists the idea that ‘word and thought were dialectically determinant.’ As Yokota-Murakami writes, for the writer Mandelstam, ‘word was the only reality he had and there could have been no thought except in word.’

Moving across cultures and placing the discussion within the Arabic tradition is Walid Hamarneh’s ‘Welcome to the Desert of Not Thinking’, which turns to modern Arab fiction. Offering the desert in Arabic literature as ‘the cradle of poetry and the place of revelation’ but also as a concept that complicates the divide between thought and non-thought, Hamarneh considers the works of two contemporary ‘desert writers’, Abdul Rahman Munif (1933-2004) and Ibrahim al-Koni (1948- ). Arguing against a romanticised semiotic dualism between the desert and the city, the essay develops a view of the desert as a ‘creative space that needs nothing to ground it other than itself.’ As Hamarneh argues, the concept of the desert provides ‘the ultimate in a mode of cognition that is different from epistemic thinking as we have come to understand it.’

And to conclude, there is Stefan Willer’s ‘Observing, Guessing, Drifting: Para-Noetic Methods in Detective Fiction.’ Discussing a range of detective fiction by Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, Raymond Chandler, and contemporary German and Austrian authors Georg Klein and Wolf Haas, Willer’s essay radically re-appraises the detective figure. Reversing the popular concept of the detective as logical, rational and analytical, Willer ingeniously uncovers the crucial half-conscious observations, random guesses, and physical and mental drifting beneath the veneer and reconstitutes the detective as a ‘key agent both inside and outside the framework of rational thought.’ As Willer’s essay affirms, humans (not just detectives) are most inexplicable when we are most rational and perplexingly logical when we are most instinctive.

There is no dearth of both new and deeply-rooted practices that are laid upon the edifice of implicit mental processes. To return to the Zen meditation which opened this introduction, it may not be possible to acquire verifiable knowledge of how this transmission works, if it is true that it does. But it is part of the broad and solid ground of ‘non-thought’, which stretches across time and cultures, without which any understanding of the human mind would be incomplete. The Buddha was suspicious of fashioning tropes and metaphors and sought to bypass what he regarded as the external décor of verbalised thoughts to reach human truths. That may be so. However, to borrow Eliot again, ‘For us there is only the trying’. And the significance of the

'raid on the inarticulate' should not be underestimated: by insisting upon rendering intelligible processes of the mind that are indescribable, even ultimately unknowable, one can at least put non-verbal communication and unconscious mental cognition in their rightful place, beside thinking, as a legitimate part of the human cognitive faculty.

## WORKS CITED

Eliot, T.S. *Four Quartets*. London: Faber and Faber, 1944. Print.

Kandel, Eric. 'The New Science of Mind and the Future of Knowledge'. *Neuron* 80 (Oct. 30 2013): 546. Print.