

'Thoughts about thoughts'

Languages are one of my great loves in life, and ever since I was a secondary school pupil, one of my favourite authors has been Guy de Maupassant, who is famous for being probably the 'king' of the short story in French. Somehow, he has the knack of getting the length, the pace, the plot just right: not easy in such short texts. Even now, I still go back to him, usually for my bedtime reading. One thing I re-read recently was his short story *Le Horla*. There are various versions of the story, but the one that I re-read is set in the form of a diary, composed by the narrator, which recounts his sort of inner life over a period of time. '*Le Horla*' is the name that he gives to a strange kind of 'spirit' that seems to possess him; it is not a normal French word, and seems to have been invented by Maupassant. There is some suggestion that it may come from the French '*hors là*': 'out there', and so might mean: 'the thing out there'. The only thing is that this 'spirit' or being is never seen directly. Nevertheless, it terrorises the man, possesses him, stops him from living his life, and in the end, he is ready to go to all sorts of extreme lengths to liberate himself from its grasp.

What this being, the *Horla*, is supposed to represent is not necessarily clear – like all the best writers, Maupassant leaves a lot to our interpretation – but one interesting aspect to reflect upon, it seems to me, is that of the almost obsessive, anguish-ridden thoughts that possess the man more and more as the story goes on. In the end, these thoughts cause him really to lose control of his life, and he ends up going to extreme and terrifying lengths to try to rid himself of them – though without success.

All of that got me thinking about the subject of 'thoughts'. Sometimes I think we can labour under the misapprehension that everything that goes on in our minds is somehow under our conscious control. I think I can remember exactly where I was – I was about 20, and had just been to the university library – when I realised I think for the first time that not all my thoughts were under my conscious control. Like the poor man in Maupassant's story – though I must admit not to the same degree! – I suddenly realised that I experienced unwanted thoughts, and it was something that concerned me. I think it has been something of a relief to me to learn that this is quite normal when we try to live a spiritual life. I think it is important to say at the outset that there are sorts of thoughts, of course, which are very serious, and which are properly in the realm of mental health; I would not want to be so irresponsible as to try to suggest how these could or should be dealt with: that is for the proper professionals any anyone with a problem like that really must go to such a professional for help. But there are some sorts of thoughts which are not properly pathological, but which concern our moral and spiritual life, our attempts to live as Christians. 'Thoughts' (or *logismoi*, to give them their technical name) such as these – both good and bad, actually – are something which are of central significance in the monastic tradition, and newcomers to the monastery are warned about them.

I don't know what the general consensus is, but I can assure you that the novice monk or nun does not necessarily get a signing bonus! On the contrary, in Chapter 58, St Benedict tells him (or her) that they will have to endure all of the hardships that lead them to God. At the very beginning of the life, we can tend to think that these will principally be lived on the outside of ourselves (concerning other people, or harsh conditions). Soon enough, though, once the life and its quiet routines have started to take effect, we realise that it is more complicated than this. It turns out that some of the most biting hardships are the ones we endure inside, in our heart. They are most biting, because we are never going to be able to run away from them!

We think of the heart as a beautiful thing. It is the symbol of romance nowadays (which most people think of as a pleasant thing!) and I hope that, in the religious world, we also still think of it as the place where we encounter God (again, a good – if awe-inspiring – thing). If the initial goal of the monastic is to begin the journey into the heart, that beautiful thing, it stands to reason that many of us are surprised at what we find when we lift the lid. Our spiritual nostrils can often be met with a bad smell, to say the least. It takes us quite by surprise, normally. Perhaps we have basically been morally upstanding people; we have lived basically good lives, give or take; perhaps we have even felt that we are drawing closer to God – surely there can't be much road left to travel before we are fully united with him? Then we take the first steps on this last, taxing, inner phase of the journey, and what we find disquiets us.

Even if this is really quite an understandable reaction, perhaps we should not be surprised at what we find in fact. After all, Jesus tells us in St Mark's Gospel that 'the things that come out of a person are what defile them,' by which he means out of the heart. He goes on: 'For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man.' (Mk 7:21-23). In the Old Testament too, the Prophet Jeremiah is not notoriously positive about the heart! He says: 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?' (Jer17:9). So it seems that these foul contents that we find there are not really to be wondered at! Of course there are good and pleasant thoughts which can occur to us, too, but I am not going to go on about these, as they do not seem to cause many people many problems!

One of the most concerning things about the bad thoughts we encounter within ourselves is that we can think that they are 'us'; that can make us very anxious and distressed. We need to realise that we are not our thoughts. (If you think about it, one of the astonishing things about the human mind is that we can think about what is in it: we can think about our thoughts.) It seems a surprising thing to say, but thoughts – as they pop up within us, in a way which is quite outside of our control – are actually a neutral thing. It is as though our mind is watching a film. If you find that hard to stomach, think about Jesus's temptations in the wilderness. Jesus was being tempted – in the sense that Satan was trying to get him to do things – at the level of his human

mind, surely? But we can't believe that, because these awful thoughts of rebelling against God flashed through Jesus's mind, he was somehow morally responsible for them. No: the monastic teaching has always been that thoughts that pop up like this are not our responsibility; they are *in* us, but not *of* us. However, the way in which we deal with them *is* our responsibility, and it is our dealing with them in the right way that stops them from becoming part of us. Like Jesus, we have to bat them off.

St Aelred, in one of his sermons, compares the heart to the Temple in Jerusalem, with its outer court, its inner court, and the Holy of Holies, and so on. He makes it quite clear that the 'outer court' of our heart is open to all comers, and there is not really much we can do (at one level) to prevent any and all thoughts from coming in there. The question is, how much further will they get into the Temple? Aelred says that we let things further inside when we start to ponder on them deeply, when we start to take delight in them, when we start to give consent to the thoughts. He says that this is fine for good thoughts; it is what we seek to do in *lectio divina*, for example (notice how Jesus rebuts the devil's suggestions with quotes from the Old Testament). However, with bad thoughts, it could lead to a neutral thought becoming a sinful thought and, eventually, even sprouting into a sinful action, and then a sinful habit. He says that the only thing to do is to show the bad thoughts the door at the first opportunity; as St Benedict says, to dash them upon the rock of Christ.

How do we do this in practice? The monastic tradition says that the most fruitful way is to speak the thoughts that are bothering us out loud to an 'elder', in other words to someone who is spiritual mature and whose wisdom we trust. Most of these thoughts we be no problem to us if we didn't feel, like Maupassant's character, that they somehow had a mysterious power over us. In a way which I don't think I can really quite explain, there is something about speaking them out loud to someone we trust we seems to divest these thoughts of this power that they can have. (It is interesting that Maupassant's character doesn't seem to reveal his thoughts to anyone, with catastrophic effects.)

One such trusted person in my monastic life has been Fr Abbot. He has been someone to whom I have been able to speak whenever things (including thoughts) have been bothering me in a significant way. Like many of us, I suspect, I have sometimes put off going to talk about things, because I didn't want to trouble him; because I knew in my mind what the solution to the problem was. Sure enough, the problem would go on. Eventually, I would go to see him. The strange thing is that I could have told you everything that would happen in the meeting beforehand: what he would say; when he would say it; when he would polish his glasses; when he would fiddle with the pectoral cross. And the meeting went exactly as I had thought. The difference was, when I came out of the meeting, the thought did not bother me anymore - even if it was still there, I was able just to ignore it. Before, it was using up my spiritual energy.

What, then, is the take home message? I think the message from the monastic tradition is, yes: our thoughts are powerful and important things, but they are not us - not until

we choose them. As Christians (and monks, those of us who are), we need to learn how to live with our thoughts, and to exercise the power of choice fruitfully, and this can be difficult and challenging. But this narrow path becomes easier to travel if we have a guide, an elder, someone to whom we can reveal our thoughts, and whose perspective and prayers will enable us to choose wisely and well.

Suggested Activities

1. Abba Zeno was a desert father with a gift for helping people in spiritual matters. Read this story (from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers) about a young monk who goes to see him, and who has problems with an obsessive thought.

Abba Zeno

It was said of Abba Zeno that he was small, and had a wiry body, but that he was very perceptive, full of resolution and fervour towards God. He was also very welcoming to other people, and this was why great crowds, not only of monks but of lay people and others, would come to his cell; they opened their thoughts to him, and were healed. We met one of the Fathers who used to live in the same region as holy Zeno, and he gave us a word to build us up.

We asked him about a particular thought, saying to him: 'If someone has a certain thought, and sees that it has conquered him and, despite the fact that he reads a lot and listens to what the Fathers have said on the subject of purity, he wants to correct himself but cannot manage it, is it better for him to lay this open before one of the Fathers, or should he try to make use of what he has read, and to rely on his own conscience?' And the old man said to us: 'He should open his heart to another, who is capable of being of benefit to him and should not rely on himself. For no one can come to his own rescue, especially when he is overwhelmed by the passions.'

'When I was young,' he went on, 'the following happened to me. There was, in my soul, a passion that dominated me. As I had heard that Abba Zeno had healed many people in this position, I wanted to go and find him and open my heart to him. And the devil stopped me, by saying to me: "Since you know what you have to do, just do it; carry out what you have read about. Why go and scandalise the old man?" And each time that I got ready to start the journey to Abba Zeno, the battle against the passion seemed to fade out in me, so that I did not start out. And when I gave in to the idea that I should not go to see the old man, once again, the passion gripped me.'

I started again to try to set out to see the old man, but the enemy deceived me with the same trick, and would not let me open my heart to the old man. It used even to happen quite often that I would go to see the old man, with the intention of telling him everything, but the enemy would not let me speak, putting shame in my heart, and saying to me: "Since you know how to heal yourself, what is the good of talking about it? You are not being careless; you know

what the Fathers have said about this." This is what the adversary used to whisper to me, so that I would not reveal my sickness to the doctor and thus be healed. The old man knew quite well that I was having thoughts, but he did not criticise me, but rather waited until I told him myself. He taught me the right way to go, and sent me off.

In the end, deeply afflicted and in tears, I said to my soul: "How long, miserable soul, will you persist in not wanting to be healed? People who live far away come to the old man and are healed but you, why is it that you do not want to be healed, when you live so close to the doctor?" With my heart on fire, I got up and said to myself: "I am going to the old man, and, if I find no one else there when I get there, I will know that it is the will of God that I should reveal my thought to him."

I went, and there was nobody else there. According to his custom, the old man gave me some teachings about salvation, and about the way of purifying oneself of impure thoughts. But once again, I was ashamed; I did not open my heart to him, but I just asked for his blessing. The old man got up, said a prayer, and showed me out, going in front of me to the door, whilst I was tormented by my thoughts. Would I speak to the old man or not? I was walking a little behind him, and he seemed not to be paying attention to me. He put his hand to the door to open it, but, seeing me tormented by my thoughts, he turned towards me and tapped me on the chest, saying: "What is wrong with you? Do you not know that I am a man too?" When he said this word to me, I thought that the old man had uncovered what was in my heart, and I fell at his feet, begging him with tears, saying: "Have pity on me." He said to me: "What is wrong with you?" I said to him, "You know; why must I say it?" He said to me: "You are the one who must say what is wrong with you." Covered with shame, I revealed my passion to him, and he said to me: "Am I not a man as well? Do you want me to tell you what I know? Have you not been coming here these last three years with these thoughts, and yet you have not let them out." I fell down, begged him and said to him: "By the Lord, have pity on me." He said to me: "Go, do not neglect your prayer, and do not speak evil of anyone." So I returned to my cell, and I did not neglect my prayer. And by the grace of Christ and the prayer of the old man, I was no longer assaulted by that passion.

2. Read Fr Columba Stewart's article on the desert fathers and their teaching on 'thoughts': <http://monasticmatrix.osu.edu/commentaria/desert-fathers-radical-self-honesty>
3. Do some *lectio divina* on the Gospel of the Temptation of Jesus:

Luke 4:1-12

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are

the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours." And Jesus answered him, "It is written,

'You shall worship the Lord your God,
and him only shall you serve.'"

And he took him to Jerusalem, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; for it is written,

'He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you,'

and

'On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"

And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.