

The Undergrowth of Thought



Mario Sironi

Part 1

Point of Departure

I have often noticed that some thought I am having conjures up an image of a place or situation, in fact gives the distinct impression that the thought is happening in that imaginary setting. Or else it is a less definite thing, just a sense that pervades the thought each time it arises, like its colouring. What is the meaning of these associations? Because it is context and not content it is easily ignored, while the thought, proceeding through its links on its own vector of direction and momentum, leaves the *locality* of the original thought behind. It seems incidental and irrelevant in the region of less *fanciful* linkages. The very tenacity of the *locational* link makes it negligible, so that it becomes customary to allow the thought and its irrational association to become *dislocated*. Thus the power of the imagination is demoted in favour of the practical pursuit or accepted sequential habits of thought.

What if I were to place the location of the thought in the forefront of my mind, paying attention only to that adventitious link?. This would be a reversal of priority and at the expense of memory and pragmatism by which conclusions are reached or recovered time and again. Instead the thought would assume the position of stimulus to something as yet un-thought whose claim to attention was justified by its tenacity. Something believed to be commonly symbolised, a collectively understood idea is then for the moment superseded by meaningless sense-data (the *location* of the idea). No doubt these links could be thought of as historical, but other associations that *colour* a thought may have more significance and many *locational* colourings may link to others with anticipatory force.

This would compare with what happens when a train of thought has been set in motion by a chance event and, by way of a number of associated thoughts, reaches what may seem to be an irrelevant or inconclusive end. This can be conceived of, however, in another way, namely that such a train of thought is only ostensibly independent, and has in fact selected an adventitious event or attached to a stray distraction to attempt to reach a point where some unsolved *obstacle* is illuminated. In other words what comes out of the blue, the distraction and its associations, are co-opted by the same force as generates the dream material and is of use in the same way as the process of unravelling a dream. Here is a psychic phenomenon, then, similar to what confronts the mind with persistent *locational* sense-data contained, as an attachment, within a thought. I contend the thought to be itself inchoate, self-selective as heuristic material essential to the fuller understanding of self (the thinker).

What I am suggesting is that the sense-data is a preconception and recurs with such persistence for the purpose of finding a means for perception to become conception. What I will argue is that the phenomenon of *location* is quite close to a dream fragment, and in the same way as in a dream, particularly a recurring dream, it may represent something not yet thought, yet which is crucial to an enhanced comprehension of self, requiring attention by the conscious mind which it has entered by way of the door of sleep.

To make this clearer I want to give an example of such a phenomenon. It occurred as I was trying to understand this notion of 'location of a thought' shortly after rising in the morning and waking from a dream in which I was trying to puzzle out how to write an essay required as part of an entry examination. The problem that faced me in the dream was how to decide on a topic I could write about, but then changed to how to write in coherent French, which boiled down to getting the tenses of irregular verbs right. The location of this task changed from sitting in a narrow pew along with other candidates and teachers into my going up a steep road that led into a tunnel. As I was coming to the light at the end of the tunnel, my mind was taken up with the crucial importance of deciding whether to use the subjunctive tense of the verb *être* and what its form ought to be. While I did not know either the form of the tense in French or its usages, the dream brought into focus by the symbolism of a long steep hill, a distant tunnel, the daunting mental effort ahead that lay between *am* and *would be*.

I had just risen when I heard a raucous holler outside which seemed to come from some distance away. I ran to the window to see if I might not catch a sight of a local rough sleeper who might on such a spring morning be having a periodic change from a quiescent state to one of his florid episodes. If so, I wondered, would it be worth my while to go down into the street and hope that our usual brief greeting of one another might calm him. At the back of my mind, however, there was something more calculating. The way he threw his arms around and glared when delusional was an ideal photo opportunity, and moreover, the light was just right. What then came into my mind was a phrase from the Revised Standard Version of the story in Mark's gospel of the Gadarene swine and the demoniac described as 'of unclean spirit' cured by Jesus, the cure referred to by the phrase 'clothed and in his right mind'. I started then to wonder how that would be translated into modern English and that moved to my remembering the name of the woman who had tried, without much success, many years ago, to tutor me in Greek and to the old fashioned room, even a sense of the carpet and the dining room table at which I seemed to recall we sat with the Greek

grammar book open. I was then wondering what the Greek for 'right mind' would be, but being unable to say, found myself thinking of a story she had told me about how she had heard a pretentiously named photographer's studio in our hometown – *Casa Doré* – rendered in the regional dialect.

These links are all conscious and the point arrived at, the old memory of an amusing story that hinges on a familiar patois is a far cry from the initial stimulus it can be retraced back to through its stages. But things do not stop there. Reaching for my old brown hard-backed RSV given me by my grandmother in the fifties, at the same time noticing the location of the thought – the room with my elderly relative, the colour of the velvet armchair, the fretwork cabinet of the wireless set, and picturing her final minutes of life in the nursing home – I read the story from Mark. According to his account, Jesus had only to step from the boat that brought him across the lake to Gerasa (the region or Jerash in modern Jordan) to be spotted by the man of unsound mind, who made a bee-line for him, who knows – like a beggar might who catches your eye. Was my thought about having an effect on a disturbed man an expression of an inflated ego that presumed to be on a par with Jesus, someone certainly with remarkable charisma? But reading further, the extraordinary account of the exorcism when the demons were evacuated into the herd of swine, sealing the fate of the beasts, I began to think that there was a connection with the puzzle of the French grammar (or Greek grammar) and that the phenomenon of the *location* of a thought was somehow unfolding.

This chain of associations gives the impression of something inexpressible seeking expression, which may also take the form of a physical symptom that defies medication. Or a psychic situation may communicate itself by creating a dream-thought in another's mind deemed to be attentive enough to seemingly irrelevant constellations.

Returning to the biblical story we can note five elements in the deliverance.

First, presence – Mark implies neither that the visit of the Nazarene was expected, although it seems likely his fame went before him, nor that there was something superhuman about the man stepping from the boat on to the shore. What seems to be suggested is that when the mad person made a beeline for him he does not look away. His attention is not deflected from something unsightly and disturbing.

Secondly, recognition – the man from the boat seems to understand the wild display and the rattling of chains as a communication. That communication contains recognition – worship (according *worth*) on the part of the man of unsound mind. So the impression is of mutual recognition.

Thirdly, confrontation – the calling of something by its name, the setting aside of fear. This step can be understood in terms of the need for nameless sense-data (potentially desperate urges) to be comprehended (*held together*).

The fourth aspect of the story is the casting out, and consequent taming of the wild uncontained incomprehensible sense-data.

This brings in an element that overarches the story, namely fear. Terror of extinction might be the unthinkable content of such sense-data, such as Stevie Smith hints at in her poem, 'Nobody heard him, the dead man...' her poem begins. 'I was much further out than you thought And not waving but drowning'. But it is the sound of distress which to me makes sense of the story, a sound like the alarming roar I heard in the street shortly after I got up, or the scream of a frightened child, and it is credible

it was just such a sound that scared the pigs. The RSV has 'herd of swine', but a list of collective nouns for pigs includes *drove*, *fleet* and *sounder*. That sound is distressing only because it registers something that is felt as unable to be contained. Bion's model of 'container-contained' introduces the idea of 'catastrophic change', words that 'emphasise the violence of the forces of thought requiring containment, and the particular need for the container which was neither too rigid nor too flexible, so that the new idea would develop and not destroy its container by its expansive thrust' (Meltzer, 1986, p51). The name attributed to the 'unclean spirit' is *Legion* 'for we are many', not a single communicable thought, but an undifferentiated chaos.

I now want to follow this train of seemingly random thought further to what I will call a provisional end point. By 'end point' I mean only to suggest a kinetic energy or *purpose*, that of insight (or convergence) 'by which one means the ability to penetrate and comprehend the unconscious with the organ of consciousness' (Meltzer, 1981, p.507). There is an obvious correspondence with Jung's notion of an autonomous complex that becomes increasingly clamant, perhaps dangerously so, the more it is ignored. Here Jung's 'purpose' is that a larger self is in the making when the complex 'swims into his ken' by the self assimilating into itself the energy of the complex, the danger being that of annexation of the self by the complex.

An analytical colleague of mine spoke in supervision of a patient she had been seeing for some time and with whom she had done a lot of work. In the context of their work together and what had been worked through so far one thing persisted – a life long tendency to severe fits. As her sister's wedding approached, her mother cautioned her sternly that she must not on any account have a fit on the day, which, as she told her analyst, made it almost certain that there would be a fit to disrupt the wedding. Without rehearsal the analyst said, in a low pensive voice as though it were something they had each arrived at in the same moment, 'Perhaps you don't need to now'. 'Perhaps not', was the reply. Something incommunicable in any other way other than by the disruption of the fits was at last comprehended. The fits did not recur – their function as sense-data requiring to be contained by comprehension had been reached.

This illustrates a development of the idea of *location* of thought, where there is a plausible historic link in a persistent association with that thought. In the case above there seems to be a kind of pressure (the need to know) in the content of a dream which moves the action on by means of a series of seemingly chance happenings, coincidences easily dismissed as 'off the wall' and irrelevant. My dream represented a struggle for comprehension (getting the tenses right) in order to write what? To master a different language (French = the dream thoughts) and to be able to distinguish between the present (what is) and what might be (the subjunctive, the most elusive of the tenses). The story that surfaced following the dream takes a path through the undergrowth in a series of unlikely links in search of connection, of a vehicle of thought for the feelings that lurk there. But to what end?

Later that morning, the morning following my dream, I met W who coincidentally posed the question as to whether feeling arose from thought or was it the other way round. And on the following day I was on my way to an appointment when on the point of reaching my destination, and thinking about the question my colleague had raised the day before, I suddenly remembered the appointment had been cancelled. Inside, I met another colleague J and we got into conversation. She spoke with some

delight about what I thought she said was a new friend she'd made, which was, she said, 'fantastic'!

'A word with many connotations,' I suggested, meaning *friend*.

'Oh no!' she replied emphatically, 'no fantasy; just what it is'. What she then said threw me off balance. 'Have you read Bruno Schulz?' she asked.

'*Street of Crocodiles*? Yes,' I said.

'At first, I couldn't connect with it,' she went on, 'but now I am enthralled.'

Then I remembered that quite recently I had been thinking of the animated film of that name, which I had seen goodness knows how long ago. Neither the book, nor the theatrical interpretation of it by Simon McBurney's *Theatre de Complicité* could I recall, nor for that matter was the film clear in my mind in any detail. It was the atmosphere that had stayed with me, a sense I was unable to put into words. Later, I was surprised to find the following on the internet:

Influenced by a tradition of Eastern European animation, the Quays display a passion for detail, a breathtaking command of color and texture, and an uncanny use of focus and camera movement that make their films unique and instantly recognizable. Best known for their classic 1986 film *Street of Crocodiles*, which filmmaker Terry Gilliam recently selected as one of the ten best animated films of all time, they are masters of miniaturization and on their tiny sets have created *an unforgettable world, suggestive of a landscape of long-repressed childhood dreams*. [my italics]

The passage below from his study *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* emphasises the notion of a *gap* which opens on to a suggestive 'location' suggested by some more calculated thought and relates it to the *new* capabilities of photography. I happened upon it in such an unusually fortuitous way, involving a striking coincidence, as if to say 'I stretched out a hand and there it was', as to constitute the confluence of medium and message. I had taken up the dictionary to learn whether the word *occurrence* had one –r or two and on the previous page the word *obverse* caught my eye. Having learned that Benjamin's thought and that of Schulz were linked I picked up my Fontana *Illuminations* paperback which I have had, virtually unread since 1997. I opened it at random and, arrested by the word *film*, began to read the passage some of which is included below. In it (I have not included the sentence), I came across the word *obverse*. I don't remember ever having encountered the word in my reading or truly understood it. My dictionary gave as one meaning: 'turned towards one'. I took it as a kind of signpost.

The film has enriched our field of perception with methods which can be illustrated by those of Freudian theory. Fifty years ago, a slip of the tongue passed more or less unnoticed. Only exceptionally may such a slip have revealed dimensions of depth in a conversation which had seemed to be taking its course on the surface. Since *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* things have changed. This book isolated and made analysable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception. For the entire spectrum of optical, and now acoustical, perception the film has brought about a similar deepening of apperception... Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of a tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling... Evidently a different space opens itself to the camera than opens

to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man... The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses. (Benjamin, 1973, pp. 228-230)

The Quay brothers themselves use words like ‘nightmarish netherworld’ and ‘futile pursuits’ in introducing their film. And Sarah Scott concludes her paper on *Walking Down the Street of Crocodiles* thus, ‘The fragmentary nature of *The Street of Crocodiles* inevitably causes some difficulty in adequately describing its intertwining aesthetic and formal aspects. Yet it is the fragmentary nature of human development, memory and language that reflects the fragmentary world of Benjamin, Schulz and the Brothers Quay.’ (Scott, 2005) In particular I choose to select the following passage from Scott’s paper to give the impression of how this unlikely mention of Bruno Schulz continues the train of thought precipitated by my tantalising dream of incomprehension.

While it is always tempting to imbue the fetishistic, perverse quality of film by employing Freudian psychoanalytic theory, it feels neither necessary nor relevant here precisely because *The Street of Crocodiles* deals with a very different kind of fetish object. As Tyrus Miller points out in a recent article on the film, the Quays’ work is bound up with an endlessly repetitive chain of signifiers that are less to do with sexual desire per se than a reflection on the modern world’s adoption of the fetish as a means to repeat the circle of commodity value that entices the consumer to purchase attractive objects again and again. However, this fetishistic process has a mysterious edge that was less commonly reflected upon in the lifespan of Schulz and his European contemporaries. Employing a line of thought more akin to the writings of Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, Miller suggests that the miniature Schulzian world brought to life in *The Street of Crocodiles* is a metaphor for “the trick of the collapse of the temporal interval between the fashionable and the out-moded”. Indeed, this *interval between the attractive characteristic of the fashionable object and the dusted, rotting fragments that mark the material’s presence is precisely what gives the non-organic form a human, autonomous quality.* [my italics] The rotting away of the urban scene in *Street of Crocodiles*, with its twitching mechanisms and discarded circularity that inhabits the death of the material body, is what the protagonist puppet (the fetishist) wanders aimlessly in search of. (*ibid.*)

What it is I simply want to highlight here is the mention of circularity and futility which gains an obsessive aura of excitement but which is sterile as though it is not accompanied by feelings that presage and invite insight. These psychic phenomena would be, I think, what Money-Kyrle meant by “misrepresentations of meaning”. And it is the elision of this ‘interval’ or gap that I will try to bring into focus in thinking about self-deception, my own and that of others in the work I do with patients. This is condensed in Miller’s idea that the ‘miniature’ stuffy world of Bruno Schulz as a ‘metaphor for “the trick of the collapse of the temporal interval between the fashionable and the out-moded”’. It is in that interval that the *undergrowth of thought* makes itself felt. This sense is corroborated in Robert Fulford’s article in the Canadian English language national *Globe and Mail*: ‘literature sinks deep into the unconscious, searching for hidden myths, buried memories, childhood dreams’.

This is how literature works, Bruno Schulz said: it sinks deep into the unconscious, searching for hidden myths, buried memories, childhood dreams. Down there, at the bottom of the mind, it discovers how we are made, why we do what we do. "The artist," he wrote, "is an apparatus for registering processes in that deep stratum where values are formed." Those processes are acted out in *The Street of Crocodiles*, a now-legendary production by the Theatre de Complicité of London, which opens July 30 at the Premiere Dance Theatre in Toronto.

Schulz's own report on our controlling unconscious is fascinating, and always oblique. While he considered storytelling central to human life ("The most fundamental function of the spirit is inventing fables, creating tales"), his own stories are not simple. No one ever called their appeal universal. "Poetry happens," he explained, "when short-circuits of sense occur." His work is full of crossed wires, wild fantasies colliding with humble realities. (Fulford, 1998)

Before entering on any scrutiny of the notice I had taken of J's mention of Bruno Schulz, I had already begun to have an uncomfortable sense of a deception of mine. I had told her I had read the book. As soon as she said had I read it I answered that I had. In fact, although I have had a copy of it for eighteen years I had only dipped into it. In the same way, Simon McBurney's adaptation I had seen at the Riverside was a vague memory; it was the Quay's film that had left the biggest impression, although I seemed unable to say actually why. Like J's first attempt (she couldn't connect), I wondered later had I likewise failed, and began to entertain a thought about self-deception.

It may appear that the argument I am putting forward is itself a self-deception and relies upon a specious promotion of coincidences – so what if one is a little economical with the truth! What I felt was being revealed was not a little lie, not even a habit I am caught out in from time to time of embellishing things to make myself seem in a supposedly better light; such simulation is the tip of an iceberg. What is exposed in the Quay brothers' film is self-deception of a dark and imponderable nature. The prurient figure who wanders among the decay of the fashionable deceives himself that something dead is living and exciting. Such self-deception operates as a denial of the existence of something (as yet) *unthinkable*. The process set in motion by the liminal *location* of a thought, which I have introduced here, may be the indication the unthinkable – a complex phenomenon of self-deception – is ripe for entry into thought.

And so it occurred to me that my defences were some sort of coded deceptions and operated in the collapse of a gap (between the fashionable = acceptable and the outmoded (the sentence pronounced by the new season). My point is that in the gap the undergrowth (that from which I am defended) is encountered. The drift of this train of thought begins to link the idea of *undergrowth* with *underhand*, *underworld*, that which is in fashionable terms is *infra dig* and must be dissimulated.

End of Part 1