REFLECTIONS
THINKING I

...numquam si ita esse quod nihil tam inesec...numquam minus solus esse canare non est secus — Cicero.

Every one of us is like a man who sees things in a dream and thinks that he knows them perfectly and then wakes up to find that he knows nothing — Plato.

Thinking does not bring knowledge as do the sciences;

Thinking does not produce useful practical waders;

Thinking does not solve the riddles of the universe;

Thinking does not endow us directly with the power to act — Martin Heidegger.

To talk about Thinking seems to me so presumptuous that I feel I should mark this with an apology to you, and, as a matter of course, a need for the topic itself. What disturbs me is that I try my hand at it, for I have neither claim nor ambition to be a "philosopher," or to be numbered among what Kant called, not without irony, "Denker von Geburt" ("professional thinkers"). The question is then, should I not have let this problem remain in the hands of the experts, and the answer will have to show what prompted me to venture from the relatively safe fields of political science and political theory into that more difficult, instead of leaving well enough alone.

Factually, my preoccupation with mental activities has two rather different origins. The immediate impulse came from my attending the trial of Adolf Eichmann, in Jerusalem. In my report on it, I spoke of "The banality of evil." But that phrase I held no thesis or doctrine, although I was dimly aware that it went counter to our tradition of thought — literary, theological, or philosophical — about the phenomenon of evil. Evil, we have learned, is something different. Its incarnation is Satan, a fire from heaven, who fell from heaven (St. Luke 10:18), or Lucifer, the fallen angel (Unamuno: "The devil is an angel, too") whose sin is pride ("proud, as Lucifer"); namely, that superiority of which only the best are capable — what they want is to be like Him. Evil men, we are told, are out of evil, that may be representative of not having turned over well through no fault of their own (Shakespeare's Richard III), or the story of Cain, who slew Abel because: "God had regard for Abel's offering, but for Cain and his offering He had no regard."

...or they may be prompted by weakness (Chekhov). Or, on the contrary, by the powerful hatred that wickedness feels for sheer goodness (Iago's "I hate the Moor: my cause is hearted"); Clapperton's hatred for Billy Budd's "hatefulness" a hatred considered by Melville to be "a dangerous state of nature to nature."

You're always telling me you know exactly how I feel. Well, this time I'm calling your bluff. Exactly how do I feel?
THE TRANSFORMATION OF FATHER

The transformation of Father began 
the spring they left the port. 
He crocheted scarves dropped between the dock boards, 
his choker-fur cap plucked into a beard. 
Like a black banana peel.

The summer, grappling with the scrap lot, 
where he labored to offload 
he lost his ingenuity 
among hubcaps, old buttons, cans of beer. 
His vest slunk down the sewer.

The transformation of Father began 
as speed up with the fall. 
Hunched in a circle, the children-stamped around him, 
upping at long underpants. 
His face turned red as hell.

Slipped to the skin, he unzipped, and threw his clothes inside the fireplace, poked them three times with a steel-plunged fork. 
The ash died white as snowflakes. It was time to chuck the old regime.

—FLORENCE ELON

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thought would ever be able to produce the good deed as really and clearly as if "virtue could be taught", and learned, only habits and customs can be taught, and we know only too well the alarming speed with which they are unlearned and forgotten when new circumstances demand a change in usual and habitual patterns. (The fact that we usually react matters of good and evil in terms of "morals" or "ethics" may indicate how little we know about them, in the word "morals" coming from moral and the word "ethics" from ethics, the Latin of the Greek words for custom and habit, the Latin being associated with rules of behavior, whereas the Greek has to do with habits, like our "habits.")

The absence of thought I was confronted with sprang neither from the uselessness of labor, from the uselessness of labor, from the uselessness of labor, nor from the uselessness of labor. The sense of reality in the matter—nor even in the sense of "moral insanity" for the absence was just as noticeable in instances that had nothing to do with so-called ethical decisions or matters of conscience.

The question that imposed itself would demand the art of subduing, of thinking about, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of the results and the specific content of the activity—could this activity be among the conditions that make men absent from working, or even actually "constrain" them again? The very word "conscience," at any rate, points in that direction, similar as it means "to know well and by myself," a kind of knowledge that is actualized in every thinking process. And it is not this by-product, implicated by distraction, or even actually "constrained" them again? The very word "conscience," at any rate, points in that direction, similar as it means "to know well and by myself," a kind of knowledge that is actualized in every thinking process. And it is not this by-product, implicated by distraction, or even actual...
"En garde! Anot!"

autonomy for Plato that the invisible eye of the soul was the organ for
holding invisible truth with the certainty of knowledge, it became
autonomous for Descartes—during the famous night of his "revelation"—that there
existed "a fundamental accord between
the laws of nature and the laws of mathematics"; that is, between
the laws of whatever lies behind mere semblance in nature and the laws of
discursive thinking. At the highest, most
abstract level. And he actually believed
that this kind of thinking—what
Hobbes called "reasoning with con
sequences"—he could deliver some
knowledge about the existence of God,
the nature of the soul, and similar mat
ters.

What interested me in the cita
tions was that the contrary notion of com
plete ignorance in the age contem
plations was so overwhelming that compared
with this unfamiliarity all differences be
tween the various activities in the con
sciousness disappeared. Compared with this
quest, whether you loved and till
ed the soil, or worked and produced ob
jects of use, or acted together with oth
ers in certain enterprises was no longer
important. Even Maier, in whose
thought the question of action played
such a crucial role, uses the expres
sion "practice" [practica o exercise] sim ple
in the sense of "what man does" as opposed to "what man thinks."

I was, however, aware that one could look at
this matter from a quite different
viewpoint, and so indicate my doubts: I
ended the study of active life with a curious
sentence that Cicero ascribed to Cato,
who used to say, "Never is a man more
active than when he does nothing, never
is he less alone than when he is by
himself." ("Nuncquidem si non agere
guam in medio agere, nuncquidem
non solum esse quem non videris").

And, if Cato was right, the ques
tions are obvious. What are we "doing"
when we do nothing but think? Where
are we when we, normally always sur
rounded by our fellowmen, are to
tgether with no one but ourselves?

Obviously, to raise such questions
has its difficulties. At first glance, they
seem to belong to what used to be
called "philosophy" or "metaphysics,"
two terms and two fields of inquiry
that, as we all know, have fallen into
disrepute. If this were merely a matter
of modern positivism and neo-positive
assaults, we would perhaps have no
need to be concerned. To be sure, Car
nap's statement that metaphysics should
be regarded in the same light as poetry
does go counter to the claim usually
made by metaphysicians, but these, like
Carnap's own evaluation, may be based
on an underestimation of poetry. Heid
egger, whom Carnap singled out for
attack, regretted by stating that philo
sophy and poetry were indeed closely
related; they were not identical but
sprung from the same source—which
is thinking. And Aristotle, whom so
far no one has accused of writing "poetry,"
was of the same opinion:
poetry and philosophy somehow
being together. Wittgenstein's famous
aphorism "What we cannot speak of
we must be silent about," which argues
on the other side, would, if it were to
be taken seriously, apply not only to
what lies beyond some experience but,