

## The Typewriter

He could not remember the exact words of the good doctor, but he knew their meaning well. "I would advise you to put your affairs in order as quickly as possible." That was the essence of what the doctor had said.

As soon as the doctor had left the room, he told his wife angrily, "I won't waste my energy or use what little time I have left on such trivial matters as 'putting my affairs in order.'"

"But if you don't do it, it will all be left to me," she replied.

"Hire a lawyer if you must, but I simply refuse to be bothered with it all. I must get on with my work!"

His wife seemed to understand, although it distressed her to see him so annoyed about fulfilling what she felt was his duty, a duty of compassion towards her if nothing else.

"Shall I bring you your books?" she asked him meekly. "Or shall I get your typewriter?"

He hesitated for a moment in indecision, feeling too weak even to decide. But he simply had to do something! He knew the answer could not be found in books, at least not in any of the books he had read in his lifetime. And he couldn't bear to while away his last few precious moments simply thinking. He had done enough thinking. Now was the time for action! Now was the time not for beginnings but conclusions, to explain if not to others then to himself what he had found.

"My typewriter please," he answered sullenly.

His wife obediently disappeared into the hallway. The doctor had just reached the bottom of the stairway and was putting on his coat to leave, but she motioned to him from above to wait for her a moment. Then she went for the familiar portable electric typewriter and returned to the bedroom, cradling it in her arms like a baby. After placing the typewriter carefully on his bedside desk and plugging it in, she reached into the bed and helped him sit up. He tottered a bit, but she supported him with a firm grip. How heavy he was! What a burden he was in her arms!

When at last with her help he had balanced himself on the edge of the bed, she curtsied ever so slightly and left the room in silence.

The doctor was waiting for her at the foot of the stairs. She summoned her courage and walked slowly, step by step, down to meet him. Together they passed out through the front door onto the porch.

"I can't understand him," she began to weep. "He was never a particularly affectionate man, but at least he was always kind and respectful."

"Well, consider what he's going through," the doctor replied. "He's still so young. There's so much he'll never able to be accomplish. Bear him up. The time will be short: a moment, a day, a week. I'm not sure. But don't feel neglected."

"Even before his illness he told me about everything he wanted to do. We talked about it a lot. We'd stay up late at night in bed. He would talk and I would listen, just thankful to have him lying close to me. I was never really part of his life, but at least he shared his dreams with me."

Meanwhile he sat alone upstairs with his typewriter. He listened to the whirl of the machine for a long time after he had turned it on. The monotonous hum distracted him from his original intentions and plunged him once again into deep thought, something he wished to avoid.

He had always been a thinker, more interested in thinking about life than in living it. His thoughts raced through his mind, one after another, leaving him no time to put them down on paper for others to read. Who cared what he thought anyway? Perhaps he had been altogether too selfish. In his short life he had traversed many avenues of thought, waded through and dispensed with ideas loftier than he had ever heard about from others. And now he was lost in the maze of his own ruminations.

He detested thinking. It had taken him nowhere. It always disappointed him. No one seemed to know the answer to that one riddle which had puzzled him ever since his brain had started to tick. How could he know where to search if he did not know what he was looking for?

Perhaps this would be his message, his one message to anyone who would care to listen, from one who had sacrificed life itself—for what?—to *think* about life. He had loved the meaning of life more than life itself. Yet the atonement could never be a vicarious one. It was something he needed to do for himself, not by listening to others. Here was the dilemma: those who think soon learn that all is

folly, that every idea they ever had is pure nonsense, while those who never think live in a paradise they never strived to attain, a paradise they are not even aware of, a paradise which can be recognized only by someone who thinks. Yes, a thinker! One who is familiar with the outer darkness, yet still attracted to the light of ideas burning brightly before they turn to ash. The thinker can know paradise but never live there. The non-thinker lives in paradise but never knows it. Ignorance is bliss, as the saying goes.

It was not a matter of fame. He knew he had no fame, no legacy, nothing to pass on about what he had thought, not even a drawerful of scattered notes and fragments for some scrupulous scholar to pick over and examine. The philosophers and poets had bequeathed volumes upon volumes to the world and gained for themselves a measure of divinity. Each word was a drop of ambrosia to them. Verily, their cups runneth over. Yet even though everything they wrote was meaningless, they had obtained one thing that was now forever beyond his grasp: immortality.

He surfaced from his thoughts for a moment and began to type:

“All men by nature desire to know...”

Every book, like every life, must have a beginning. Every book, like every life, must also have an ending. What had guided him throughout his own life if not his unquenchable thirst for knowledge, his insatiable desire to know, his passionate quest for Truth with a capital T! Had this not been the impetus for inventing civilization in the first place and also the reason for its demise? Why did Truth bother him so much and Life so little? And when he was dead what would either mean, what would either matter? When the cells of his brain died, all of his thoughts would die with them.

He desired certainty above all else, not mere approximations. He wanted to be sure that his thoughts perfectly mirrored reality. He looked at the sentence he had just typed and then, returning the carriage, struck it out:

~~“All men by nature desire to know...”~~

He watched the key as it punched out the slashes automatically, confident that he had done right thing. No philosopher worth his salt would dare to begin a book with such a tepid line. He was disappointed to have failed again. He did not know where to begin, not even how to write the first sentence. If he could express his frustration—even that would be something!

He lay back on the bed exhausted. In the short time he had sat in front of the typewriter he had accomplished exactly nothing, yet he had exerted himself well beyond his capacity. The pain was moving closer to his head. Perhaps he would read. That at least he could do. But his books were in his study. He did not have the strength to call out to his wife to get them for him.

“Nothing to do except think again!” he muttered to himself.

The typewriter continued its steady droning. He had not turned it off.

As he lay there looking up at the ceiling, he realized that he had reached the limit of thought, not just the limit of his own thoughts, but the limit of thought itself. He had come to the point where all one could think about was the act of thinking itself.

How could he free himself from the chains of his own thoughts? Where was the serenity that could only come to a person who had emptied his brain of all possible thoughts? An empty mind.... What an interesting idea. What an intriguing *thought!*

But no, an empty mind is not the mind of a sage, but the mind of a fool.

There was nothing more for him to do except to continue as he was, resting in bed, thinking. His thoughts assembled themselves into phalanxes, preparing for the final conflict. His mind was the Armageddon where the last battle would be fought.

“I must do something!” he screamed aloud.

He struggled to sit up. It was not without a great deal of pain that he finally squirmed his way over again to the edge of the bed and let his feet drop to the floor. He pushed with both hands against the soft downy mattress until at last he was sitting once more at the little bedside desk. His body was covered with sweat. His breathing had become short and spasmodic. Brushing a few strands of damp hair off his forehead, he looked down at the typewriter. The sheet of paper he had been typing on was still in it.

Weeping, he slowly placed his fingers over the keys of the typewriter. What combination of letters and words, he asked himself, would give him the answer to his question? If he sat there long enough—

perhaps for millions of years—punching the keys of this typewriter in every possible combination, using reams upon reams of paper, would he ever write anything that satisfied him completely, something that would finally put an end to all of the worthless speculative ideas of humankind, an end to the philosophical enterprise itself?

“What words would ever give us the answer we seek?” he thought.

Perhaps there are no such words. Perhaps life is a question mark with no answers. He let his finger fall on one of the keys, which punched out automatically:

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But even this would not do. He could not even formulate the question that he wanted an answer for. He would start over, he thought. He pulled the paper from the typewriter and put in a fresh sheet. He stared at the blank white page, not knowing what to write on it.

Suddenly he heard the blaring of a trumpet between his ears. The armies of thoughts within his mind had begun their final battle. The pain now had become so intense that his whole body was numb with it. Except for the tedious throbbing of his head, he sensed little else. His eyes were misty with tears. Everything he saw looked blurred and hazy. It is thinking which makes our ideas so clear and distinct, thinking which transfigures the ethereal into unequivocal abstractions.

The tension within him continued to build. Thousands upon thousands of little thoughts and ideas crowded his mind like parasites. Soon the thoughts were no longer distinguishable from each other, having dissolved together into one big glob of plaque.

He reached once more for the typewriter. But it was too late. He heard an explosion in the distance. If there are no questions, then neither are there any answers. His head slumped forward onto the typewriter. And then he thought no more.

Previously published in *The Writing Disorder* (Fall 2022).