

## Dialogue with a Tortoise

Translated by Jhumpa Lahiri and Sara Teardo

When leaving or returning home, Mr Palomar often bumps into a tortoise. At the sight of this tortoise crossing the lawn, Mr Palomar, always keen to entertain any possible objection to his line of reasoning, momentarily halts his stream of thoughts, correcting or clarifying certain points, or in any case calling them into question and assessing their validity.

Not that the tortoise ever objects to anything that Mr Palomar opines: the creature minds his own business and isn't bothered by anything else. But the mere fact of his showing up on the lawn, trudging with claws that thrust his shell forward like the oars of a barge, amounts to asserting: 'I am a tortoise' or rather: 'There is an I that is a tortoise', or better still: 'The I is also a tortoise', and finally: 'Nothing you think that purports to be universal is so unless it is equally valid for you, Man, and for me, Tortoise.' It follows that, every time they meet, the tortoise enters Mr Palomar's mind, crossing it with its steady stride. Mr Palomar continues to ponder his previous thoughts, but now they contain a tortoise, a tortoise who is perhaps sharing those thoughts, thus putting those previous thoughts to an end.

Mr Palomar's first move is defensive. He declares: 'But I've never claimed to have a universal thought. I regard what I think as forming a part of thinkable things, for the simple fact that I am thinking it. Period.'

But the tortoise – the tortoise in his head – replies: 'That's not true. You are inclined to attribute general validity to your reasoning, not because you choose to, but because the *forma mentis* that moulds your thoughts demands it.'

Then Mr Palomar: 'You're not taking into consideration the fact that I have learned to distinguish, in what I happen to think, various levels of truth, and to recognize what is motivated either by particular points of view or the prejudices I hold. For example, what I think as a member of the fortunate class, that someone less privileged would not; or as someone who belongs to one geographical area, tradition or culture as opposed to another; or what is presumed to be exclusive to the male sex, which a woman would confute.'

'In so doing,' the tortoise interjects, 'you attempt to distil, from biased and partial motivations, a quintessential I valid for all possible forms of I, and not just a portion of them.'

'Let's say that you're right, and that this is the conclusion I'm after. What would your objection be, Tortoise?'

‘That even if you managed to identify with the totality of the human race, you would still be a prisoner of a partial, petty and – if I may say so – provincial point of view with respect to the totality of existence.’

‘Do you mean that I should assume responsibility, in all its presumed truth, not only for the entire human race, past, present and future, but also for all species of mammals, birds, reptiles and fish, not to mention crustaceans, molluscs, arachnids, insects, echinoderms, annelids and even protozoans?’

‘Yes, because there is no reason for the world’s reason to identify with yours rather than mine; with a man’s reason and not a tortoise’s.’

‘There could be a reason, one whose objective certainty cannot be cast into doubt: namely, that language is one of the faculties specific to man; consequently, human thought, based on the mechanisms of language, cannot compare to the mute thought of you tortoises.’

‘Admit it, Man: you think that I don’t think.’

‘I can neither confirm nor deny this. But even if we could prove that thought exists inside your retractable head, I must take the liberty of translating it into words to allow it to exist for others as well, besides yourself. Just as I am doing at this moment: lending you a language so that you can think your thoughts.’

‘I take it you manage effortlessly. Is it because you are generous, or because you are convinced that a tortoise’s capacity to think is inferior to your own?’

‘Let’s just say it’s different. Thanks to language, Man can conceive of things that are not present, things he hasn’t seen and never will, abstract concepts. Animals, one assumes, are imprisoned by a horizon of immediate sensations.’

‘Nothing could be further from the truth. The most basic of mental functions, the one governing the search for food, is triggered by a lack, by absence. Every thought rises from what’s not there, by comparing something seen or heard with a mental representation of what is feared or desired. What do you think the difference is between you and me?’

‘There is nothing more disagreeable or in poor taste than resorting to quantitative and physiological arguments, but you force my hand. Man is the living being with the most significant brain, with the greatest number of circumvolutions, billions of neurons, internal connections, nerve endings. The human brain, consequently, in its capacity to think, is unrivalled in this world. I’m sorry, but these are facts.’

The tortoise: ‘If we are going to boast, I could bring up my record longevity, which gives me a sense of time you can’t imagine; or even my shell, a product that, in endurance and perfection of design, surpasses human works of art and industry. But this is beside the point, which is that Man, who bears a special brain, and is the exclusive user of language, still forms part of a greater whole, an entirety of living beings, each interdependent, like the organs of a single organism. Within that whole, the function of the human mind appears to be a natural device at the service of all species, responsible for interpreting and expressing the accumulated thoughts of other beings more steadfast in their reasoning, such as the ancient and harmonious tortoise.’

Mr Palomar: ‘I would be quite proud of this. But I’ll go even further. Why stop at the animal kingdom? Why not annex the plant kingdom into the I? Would

Man be expected to think and speak for the sequoias, the thousand-year-old cryptomeria, the lichens, the fungi, the heather bush into which you, hounded by my arguments, now rush to hide?’

‘Not only do I not object, I’ll go a step further. Beyond the Man-fauna-flora continuum, any discourse presumed to be universal must include metals, salts, rocks, beryl, feldspar, sulphur, rare gases and all the non-living matter that constitutes the near-totality of the universe.’

‘That’s just where I wanted to take you, Tortoise! Watching your little snout poke in and out of all that shell, I’ve always thought you were unable to determine where your subjectivity ends and where the outside world begins: if you have an I that lives inside the shell, or if that shell is the I, an I that contains the outside world within it, then the inert matter becomes part of you. Now that I am thinking your thoughts, I realize we don’t have a problem: for you there’s no difference between the I and the shell, that is to say, between the I and the world.’

‘The same applies to you, Man. Goodbye.’

*‘Dialogo con una tartaruga’*

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