

## ***An Inquiring Mind***

*Gregorius did what he had always done when he was unsure:*

*He opened up a book.*

Pascal Mercier

What can we learn about an individual from the books they write or the reports of their friends, family members or lovers? Do we get a glimpse of the person as we might find them if we knew them first-hand and as they might convey in describing their thoughts or feelings? I am confronted by this question as I try to tell you about two individuals-- Amadeu de Prado and Raimund Gregorius and why I admired them so much. I never met either of these men, nor did anyone else as far as I can tell. Rather they are the fictional creations of a Swiss novelist and philosopher writing under the name of Pascal Mercier in his recently published novel, *Night Train to Lisbon*. This makes the task of drawing a portrait of Prado and Gregorius even more difficult, also more fun.

There is really very plot to the novel. Indeed, one reviewer noted it is largely talk—talk, talk, talk. That is true but even more it is mostly questions—questions, questions, question. That is precisely why I liked the novel so much and why I liked the individuals who raised all these questions in the first place. The questions posed issues I have given a good deal of thought to and have been thinking about a good deal of my life or they posed new ones that drew me to ones that I felt deserved to be considered. It is a rare treat to read a novel about such individuals and an even greater one to carry on a conversation with them as I sometimes do when I talk to the fictional characters in the books I read.

*Night Train to Lisbon* begins by describing a typical day in the life of Raimund Gregorius, a day that is as fixed and orderly as any other day in his life—at least in the beginning. Gregorius, is a classics professor and linguistic scholar living in Bern, Switzerland with a working knowledge of at least a half dozen languages and a vast knowledge of ancient history and texts. Following a

bizarre series of events on what otherwise would have been his daily walk to work Gregorious comes in possession of volume written by a Portuguese physician, Amadeu de Prado. He is overtaken by the volume's eloquence and intellectual brilliance and is so consumed by its contents that in striking departure from his daily routine, he leaves his class in mid-session and sets off for Portugal to learn more about the author and the sources of his extraordinary document.

He learns that the author was a highly respected doctor, a brilliant scholar and a member of the resistance movement in opposition to the Portuguese dictator Antonio Salazar. Gregorious asks: "Was it possible that the best way to make sure of yourself was to know and understand someone else?" Perhaps because of his growing sense that his own time was running out as well as his curiosity about Prado, Gregorious comes to realize that he would like to know everything he can about him. This quest brings him into contact with Prado's two sisters, a close friend, and two women, the "untouched" loves of his life.

While Gregorious's spur-of-the-moment breakout quest to Lisbon and encounters with these individuals is not without its appeal, it was not the major reason I found *Night Train to Lisbon* every bit as fascinating as Gregorious found the Portuguese volume. Rather it was the questions Amadeu de Prado raised in his volume, *A Goldsmith of Words*, and in turn considered by Gregorious as he read the text and brooded over its rich and varied meanings. As is my practice, I recorded the passages in the novel that struck me as noteworthy for one reason or another. And when I reviewed those I had collected, I realized how many were framed as questions, often one after another in cascade of queries.

Consider the following examples concerned with one of the central issues of the novel—how one comes to know another person, including oneself.

*How can you tell whether to take a feeling seriously or treat it as a carefree mood?*

*The stories others tell about you and the stories you tell about yourself: which come closer to the truth?*

*In such stories, is there really a difference between true and false?*

*What do we know of somebody if we know nothing of the images passed to him by his imagination?*

*To understand yourself: Is that a discovery or a creation?*

What difficult questions. Who has not wondered about them at one time or another? How complicated and unknowable we are. How then can we ever expect to know another person? Mercier writes: *We are in the dark about so many of our wishes and thoughts, and others sometimes know more about them than we do.* And, as if to take issue with current empirical research on person perception, he proclaims: *Inside a person it is much more complicated than our schematic, ridiculous explanations wanted to have us believe.*

In a similar vein, Mercier by way of Prado wonders a great deal about the problem of identity. Who are we anyway? Are we the same person today that we were 40 years ago? If so, what is it that constitutes our core or does that concept mean anything at all? Prado inquires:

*When was somebody himself? When he was as always? As he saw himself? Or as he was when the white hot lava of thoughts and feelings buried all lies, masks, and self-deceptions?*

*Is there a mystery under the surfaces of human action? Or are human beings utterly what their obvious acts indicate?*

Does it make any sense to say that a person has a central self, a distinctive identity that lies hidden behind most of the actions that constitute daily life? I sometimes find myself in the presence of another person who for entirely unknown

reasons calls forth expressions that somehow seem far more myself than is usually the case. How does that happen? Who is the me that appears in such situations and how does it differ from my other self or selves? Nothing that I have been able to detect in the other person seems responsible. But what I am on those rare occasions is instantaneous and continuous and thoroughly exhilarating. It seems entirely natural and I have no idea what to make of it.

Gregorious had devoted his life to a linguistic scholarship, so he was naturally drawn to Prado's frequent speculations about language and his amazement *"That words could cause something in the world, make someone move or stop, laugh or cry..."* Elsewhere he asks:

*Saying something to another: how can we expect it to affect anything?*

*How could a person almost lose his mind because a word, a single word, that occurred one single time, had escaped him?*

*How does complicated, analytical thought related to intuitive certainty?  
Which of the two should we trust more?*

These questions always remain unanswered. Neither Prado or Gregorious consider how one might go about trying to examine them or what others have said about these issues. The questions just keep unfolding, one after the other, each one as interesting as the one before. Many are the subjects of current research and writing in the cognitive sciences, the discussion of which is surely out of place in the novel, but on the mind of anyone vaguely familiar with this field. The extraordinary popularity of Malcolm Gladwell's recent book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* is a case in point, as it takes up the very same issue Prado poses in his question about the relative merits of analytical and intuitive decision-making. The same is true for other recent works on the extent to which irrational, non-conscious process govern far more of the decision making process than we usually believe.

Throughout his volume, Prado reflects on the sources of human thought and action. He knows how difficult it is to identify them with any precision, that they vary widely between individuals, and from one day to the next.

*If it is the enchanting light of a shimmering August day that produces clear, sharp-edged shadows, the thought of a hidden human depth seems bizarre and like a curious, even slightly touching fantasy....  
On the other hand, if city and river are clouded over on a dreary January day by a dome of shadowless light and boring gray, I know no greater certainty than this: that all human action is only an extremely imperfect, ridiculously helpless expression of a hidden internal life of unimagined depths that presses to the surface without ever being able to reach it even remotely.*

At the time he wrote *A Goldsmith of Words* Portugal was under the sway of the dictator, Alberto Salazar. After saving the life of the head of Salazar's secret police under conditions that depended more on his obligations as a physician than political allegiance, Prado joined the resistance. At this point his life became even more perilous than it was for any intellectual at that time. The subject of violent behavior, especially interpersonal violence is a constant theme of his volume.

*What could it mean to deal appropriately with anger?*

*What can it mean to train ourselves in anger and imagine that we take advantage of its knowledge without being addicted to its poison?*

*Why did our parents, teachers and other instructors never talk to us about it? Why didn't they tell something of this enormous significance? Not give us in this case any compass that could have helped us avoid wasting our soul on useless, self-destructive anger?*

For all his brilliance, enthusiasms, and honesty, Prado was a melancholy man who in most respects stood apart from others. He felt his isolation keenly, writing:

*“Encounters between people, it often seems to me, are like crossings of racing trains at breakneck speed in the deepest night. We cast fleeting, rushed looks at the others sitting behind dull glass in dim light, who disappear from our field of visions as soon as we barely have time to perceive them.”*

And he kept searching for someone who understood him, who could keep up with him, who was as alive and questioning as he was. He asked:

*And why had he never had a friend as Jorge O’Kelly had been for Prado--A friend with whom he could have talked about things like loyalty and love, and about death?*

*What is it that we call loneliness, it can’t simply be the absence of others, you can be alone and not lonely, and you can be among people and yet be lonely? So what is it?*

*Is it so that everything we do is done out of fear of loneliness? ....Why else do we hold on to all these broken marriages, false friendships, boring birthday parties? What would happen if we refused all that, put an end to the skulking blackmail and stood on our own?*

*Why hadn’t there been anybody before in his life who understood him so fast and so easily?*

In reading *Night Train to Lisbon* I was not deliberately looking for passages that posed questions. It was only after finishing the book and began to look closely at those I had recorded that I realized how many were framed this way. In fact, of the 120 passages I recorded from the book, a number that may be the most in my

reading history included at least one question 47 (40%). I began to wonder if questioning also played a similar role in the passages I recorded from other books that have meant a lot to me.

I copied 46 passages from Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, a book I enjoyed every bit as much as *Night Train to Lisbon* but of these quotations, only 7 (15%) included a question. Similarly, I recorded 47 passages in Philip Roth's *Exit Ghost* and of these only 7 (15%) included a question. And of the 83 passages I recorded in Eliot Perlman's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, just 7 (8%) included a question. In contrast, I recorded 83 passages in Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park*, a book that entranced me for days, and of these 28 (41%) included a question, a value that is approximately the same as Mercier's tale.

It is clear from this small sample that questioning is not a critical feature of the novels I like most. I may enjoy that style of writing and tend to think that way myself, but it probably plays little if any role in my reading preferences. Henry Perowne, the central character in Ian McEwan's *Saturday* is depicted as a deeply reflective man who spends a good part of that day at least, wondering about a wide range of topics. But his reflections are rarely formulated as questions.

It would be interesting to compare writers on this dimension. Do some employ questioning more than others and if so, what might be responsible for their practice? Do they come from a particular tradition or are they, like Pascal Mercier, derive from his discipline (philosophy) where questioning is a central practice? Regardless, it reflects a style of writing that is one of probing and wrestling with ideas. Many of Prado's questions are posed for rhetorical effect rather than a direct answer. That is, the answer is simply implied by the question. Prado says: *We humans: what do we know of one another?* Clearly he implies that we know very little. Still he wants the reader to consider the issue and give some thought to the implications of the implied answer. It is a style of writing that encourages an

internal dialogue for any reader who takes the text seriously. And it is a habit of mind I find very congenial.

In addition to a style of writing, I have noticed a similar manner in the way individuals converse with one another. Some ask a great many questions, while others might ask one or two and more commonly none at all. Perhaps questioning as a mode of conversation, indeed, as a way of thinking, is a distinct personality dimension. My hunch is that it is strongly associated with a philosophical turn of mind, a general skepticism about most beliefs, at least, a continuing effort to look more deeply into the claims of others whether they are expressed in conversation or the printed page. That is clearly true of Amadeu and Gregorious

In contrast, other individuals seem more accepting of whatever it is they hear or read and tend to comment, if they say anything at all, with a “That is really interesting” or “It reminds me of this or that” or simply change the subject altogether. They are unlikely to express any doubts or seek clarification or evidence, especially contrary evidence, relevant to the matter at hand

Those of the questioning frame of mind use an approach not unlike that of a Socratic dialogue where conversation becomes a progression of questions designed to arrive at a conclusion beyond the originally stated position. Some people are quite comfortable with this kind of discussion. For them it becomes a truly joint exchange in the interest of clarifying thinking and sharpening beliefs and perhaps even learning something along the way. I sense those of the accepting frame of mind do not fall naturally into this mode of conversation and perhaps might find it difficult to sustain for very long.

I recorded many other notable passages from *Night Train to Lisbon* that were not formulated as questions—60%, in fact. Some were simply beautiful, others took me by surprise, some rang true to my own experience, while still others were startlingly insightful. Here is a sampling of a few:

*Encounters between people, it often seems to me, are like crossings of racing trains at breakneck speed in the deepest night. We cast fleeting, rushed looks at the others sitting behind dull glass in dim light, who disappear from our field of vision as soon as we barely have time to perceive them.*

*You saw his absence and encountered it as something tangible. His not being there was like the sharply outlined emptiness of a photo with a figure cut out precisely with scissors and now the missing figure is more important, more dominant than all the others.*

*An hour to Paris. Gregorius sat down in the dining car and looked out into a bright, early spring day. And there, all of a sudden, he realized that he was in fact making this trip—that it wasn't only a possibility, something he had thought up on a sleepless night and that could have been, but something that really and truly was taking place. And the more space he gave this feeling, the more it seemed to him that the relation of possibility and reality were beginning to change.*

And so it went from one page to the next, from one set of questions to the next. A remarkable journey that began by abandoning an orderly life dedicated to classical languages for one in pursuit of an author he had never heard of, who had written a book in an unknown language, and lived in a city that he had never been to. He begins to translate the book, is captivated by its introspective musings, and one by one encounters the individuals Amadeu de Prado wrote about in *A Goldsmith of Words*. The tale is beautifully written and the questions it poses linger long in my mind, as does the reflective mood of the tale and its central characters.

In a word, some of my favorite novels have few if any questions, while others have a great many. They set me off in another direction for a

moment, my mind wanders off the page, I elaborate the tale or move it to another place. I don't rewrite the story, but may embellish it a bit. I read more actively as I grapple with the questions or make all the associations that come with experience and a lifetime of study. In a way, I reply to the author who, with his questions, invites me to join with him telling the story. It is a reading experience at its best.