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**How It Feels to Think:**

**Experiencing Intellectual Invention**

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**Abstract**

This article explores some aspects of what happens, and what can happen, in the complex practice we commonly refer to as ‘thinking’. Of all the practices involved in the messy processes we call research, ‘thinking’ is perhaps the most pervasive and widespread. Yet, it also remains the most opaque. Thinking happens, but it is seldom spoken about. The theories we normally engage with never say how they come about. Surely, philosophers of various traditions have dedicated countless pages to the question of what thought *is,* and some social scientists have recently attempted to theorise ‘methods’ of theorising in research. Such accounts, however, tend to remain at odds with the hesitant, playful and profoundly eventful *experience* of thinking-feeling in and through research. The experience, that is, that thoughts often think other thoughts, that they *happen* to us, and that *thinking* therefore involves an art of learning to confer on ideas the capacity to make us think. In this paper I seek not to make grand claims about the nature of thought, but to make perceptible the dramatic and perplexing experience that thinking can constitute. In so doing, I draw on the work of philosopher of heuristics, Judith Schlanger, whose central aim has been to come to terms with the adventure of what she terms ‘intellectual invention’. The task is to open up a different –if never fully transparent– conversation about how it feels to think.

**Introduction: It thinks!**

Nothing remarkable is happening. Memories, hopes, dreams and fears wander and pass as in a stream that is neither conscious nor hidden. They simply go on with an intensity that is certainly felt, but alas, from the point of view of the task at hand, of the work to be done, there is no sense of advancement, no comfort that progress is made. One is filled with words, sounds, random connections and associations, distractions, reminiscences of past events and conversations, years of patient study and work, texts, handwritten notes, screens and materials, but all this carefully crafted equipment avails nothing. The most methodical efforts prove futile. Everything is there, and there is nothing there, bare nothingness. Hours, days and weeks may go by. And then, nobody knows when or how, it happens.

And it happens with the suddenness of ghosts, with the imperceptibility of sleep, with the exquisite pleasure of a dim intuition that sheds light on an entire field*––* thinking. A thought pierces into existence, and as soon as it does, it calls for others, it thinks other thoughts. *It takes hold of us.* That vague mass of feelings, perceptions, hopes and dreams undergoes mutation, it is reorganised, affected by new contrasts. And suddenly, without being able to explain it, without that sense of self-control that would enable us to directly claim authorship over our own thoughts, we find ourselves conceiving of something for the first time, almost ready to say something that has never been said before, not in that way, not with that colour; as if out of a cloudy impossibility, something new, a novel idea, has happened. We are inventing in thought.

Might this be part of how it feels to think? We may know that thinking, in some form, to some extent, is something everyone *does.* Alas, René Descartes (1996[1654]) famously turned thinking into the very ontological foundation of our being, and the influence his *cogito* has exerted over the modern image of thought can hardly be overstated. Because of it, thinking has for better or ill come to define what humans are supposed to be capable of. But can thinking even be *felt?* Descartes would have likely dismissed this question as heresy. For him, and for many that have come afterwards, thinking defines what we are, it is our innermost being, and if it is capable of defining us it must be distinct from what belongs to the spells of the sensible, of all those feelings and sensitive affectations that he found too vague and ambiguous to warrant the jubilant proclamation that ‘I am’.

Doubtless, of all the practices involved in the processes of what we call research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), ‘thinking’ is surely the most pervasive and widespread. In some sense, it is perhaps that experience through which research becomes entangled with life as a whole. Because of this Cartesian image of thought, however, the experience of thinking remains irredeemably opaque, eluding not only systematic exploration but also self-reflective articulation. Thinking happens, but its experience is seldom spoken about. The philosophies and theories one engages with never say how they come about. In this sense, thinking constitutes a defining feature of the ‘behind-the-scenes’ of research activities. And insofar as some of the recent attempts at disclosing the very processes of inquiry rely on practices of ‘reflexivity’ (e.g. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Mortari, 2015), whereby thinking becomes both instrument and object of inquiry, ‘thinking’ itself appears to continue slipping behind further layers of opacity.

It is not just that the thoughts of others are never entirely transparent to oneself as a reader, but that one’s own experience of thinking remains partially opaque to oneself. By what miracles has one learned –or rather, is always still learning– to invent in thought? How could one ever hope to teach this obscure art to someone else? It is of little surprise that those that are newer to the demands and possibilities of thinking in research sometimes puzzle over how others do it, and may wonder, anxiously, about how they might ever come to do it themselves. Trying to address this difficulty, some social scientists have attempted to develop sociological accounts of thinking practices and the emergence of ideas (Camic & Gross, 2004), to device heuristic techniques (Abbot, 2004), and even to theorise some ‘methods’ of theorising (Swedberg, 2014a). I engage with some of these attempts in the first part of the article. As I will show, however, such accounts tend to remain at odds with the hesitant and eventful experienceof thinking in and through research. Indeed, if part of the move towards furthering the transparency of research processes is concerned with the pedagogical hope of transmitting ‘exemplary’ research practices (Freeman et al., 2007, p. 26), thinking practices constitute perhaps the very limit experience of transparency as such. They are simultaneously what must be learned yet cannot be taught, at least not *transparently.*

In this article I advance the proposal that, *pace* Descartes and the modern image of thought, thinking is indeed felt. Instead of assuming, as his *cogito* does, that it is always some kind of conscious ‘I’ who constitutes a requirement of thinking as such, throughout what follows I experiment with a different proposition. The proposition that, as William James (1890[1950], p. 225) once wished he could phrase it, just as we say ‘it rains!’ or ‘it blows!’, the ‘I’ is not so much the source of thought as it is an ingredient in an *impersonal* ‘it thinks!’. To be a thinking being, in other words, is to *find* oneself becoming part of a thought-event. To put it differently, I seek to experiment with the possibility that as much as we may have ideas and thoughts, in research –and elsewhere– ideas also *have us*. It is perhaps no coincidence that we speak of ideas as ‘occurring’ to us. We think, but thinking also *happens to us*. What I aim to do is to dramatise the experience that sometimes one just cannot think at will but suddenly finds oneself moved into thinking by something that happens, by an ‘it thinks!’, an event that makes us think. Indeed, inspired again by James, I want to suggest that ideas, or thoughts, are not just whatwe think, but what makes us think.

So how *does* it feel to think? There is, of course, no generalresponse to this question, and I have no intention here of attempting to provide a sense of what something like ‘*The* Feeling of Thinking’ in research might look like. By contrast, any attempt to entertain this question has to be situated*–* it must itself take the risk of speculating from its own situation, and of creating words, concepts, and propositions whose task is neither to *explain* what thinking feels like or why it feels like it does, nor to *judge* other thinking experiences or to dictate a list of steps about how we should all think. The task to be developed here is that of experimenting with the question itself: of enlarging its relevance, of making it resonate in a slightly different way (Savransky, 2016). I hope to show that staging this experiment by proposing that ideas are what makes us think may enable a different characterisation of the experience of inventing in thought. One that, while never entirely transparent (Bridges-Rhoads et al., 2015), might nevertheless prompt us to create words that make a different kind of conversation about the practice of thinking in research possible: a conversation that honours the inventive, risky, hesitant and dramaticexperience that thinking can constitute.

After discussing recent sociological accounts of thinking and the social lives of ideas, I undertake the tentative task of creating possible words for a different conversation on the experience of inventing in thought, one that honours what I here call ‘the play of ideas’. In so doing, I draw inspiration from a number of relevant thinkers, most notably from Judith Schlanger (1975, 1977, 1979, 1983), a little-known French philosopher of heuristics whose central aim for over four decades has been to come to terms with the processes of what she terms ‘intellectual invention’. As I show, her work is of major importance in this experiment in characterising the experience of thinking otherwise. For unlike the many philosophers who have posed the question of what thought is and conducted serious inquiries into its nature, and unlike sociologists who seek to explain how intellection is conditioned by social factors, Schlanger’s (1975, p.20) is a ‘study of experienced thought’. For Schlanger, thoughts are forces of their own. As such, what makes the event of intellectual invention especially interesting is that it happens at all– that despite the thick, complex, and ongoing cultural memory of works, thoughts, and ideas that populate our historical world, inventing in thought is still possible.

**Broken Knowledge and The Betrayal of The New**

The attempts by social scientists to come to terms with thinking practices deserve some attention, because their limitations make perceptible that affirming the very possibility of intellectual invention is no easy feat. What is required, I propose, is not to betray the perplexity that this experience induces. Let us begin, then, by affirming that there is something dramatic, perplexing, about the feeling of finding oneself inventing in thought. What a moment ago seemed impossible is now happening, shaking us, enabling us to think anew, to engage in creating connections among questions, ideas, words, and materials that heretofore amounted to little more than a dust-cloud of accumulated and loosely connected elements. Something has changed.

How to characterise this dramatic event? This question is demanding, and it calls for a little hesitation. For what the question requires is resisting the modern temptation to reduce such dramatic and perplexing experiences to the status of what Francis Bacon (1860, p. 96) once termed ‘broken knowledge’, as if the experience of perplexity was nothing but the manifestation of a certain ignorance or imperfection that a scientific explanation could repair. When perplexity is turned into lack of scientific knowledge, the possibility of a relevant characterisation becomes conflated with the need for an explanation capable of putting the broken pieces back together. And as I will argue, such conflation comes at a critical cost.

Nevertheless, it is just this modern habit of providing explanations, of addressing the perplexity of intellectual invention as a case of broken knowledge in need of reparation, that is at work in many recent attempts in the social sciences at coming to terms with it. Developing what they have baptised as ‘the new sociology of ideas’, a number of sociologists have set out to employ ‘the tools of sociological analysis to explain why thinkers make the intellectual choices they do’ by studying of the work and lives of ‘women and men that specialize in the production of cognitive, evaluative, and expressive ideas and [examining] the social processes by which their ideas […] emerge, develop, and change’ (Camic & Gross, 2004, p. 236). Drawing critically on an earlier generation of sociologies of knowledge and the Cambridge School of intellectual history (e.g. Skinner, 1969), they have proposed that intellectual invention can be explained socially. As such, they hold that certain ‘relatively autonomous social logics and dynamics […] that shape and structure life in the various social settings intellectuals inhabit’[[1]](#footnote-2) constitute factors that ‘do the most to explain the assumptions, theories, methodologies, interpretations of ambiguous data, and specific ideas to which thinkers come to cleave’ (Gross 2008: 11).

Others, interested precisely in the experience that thinking or ‘theorising’ often happens without much deliberative reasoning, without one being able to provide a plausible narrative –social or otherwise– for the coming into existence of a new idea, have acknowledged that the social sciences can go only so far in attempting to explain *why* intellectual invention happens. Yet they have reacted to such limitations by turning to another realm of explanation– that of neurophysiological mechanisms. It is neurophysiology and the cognitive sciences that are now deemed capable of repairing the ‘broken knowledge’ we may have of such processes, for they are said to be ‘in the process of demonstrating how we know more than we can tell.’ (Knorr Cetina, 2014: 33). Thus, drawing on research on the pre-conscious processes of attention, emotion, and cognitive processing, Karin Knorr Cetina (2014, p. 39) argues that in order to affirm the intuitive dimension of thinking, we need to ‘take the human theorizer seriously for what he or she is: a skilled processor.’ According to Knorr Cetina, this move can explain why theorising ‘can result in the optimal performances associated with flow when one can volitionally narrow the attention to the task’, and disclose that theorising ‘involves feelings that arise from research areas that emotionally excite (or turn off) the theorizer’ (Knorr Cetina, 2014, pp. 55, 57). As she concludes, echoing the writings of 1990s cognitive psychologists (as well as, inadvertently, their critics):

In our cultures, human beings have long been seen as “thinkers”. But what if we see them instead as “processors” of information? Shifting away from the thinker and toward the processor may seem like a small step, but it has the substantial consequence of taking us from explicit reasoning to implicit reasoning– to a level of information processing that appears to be efficient, high capacity (in terms of the number of variables and dimensions it can deal with simultaneously), pre-conscious (we can still consciously do something else), and not controlled by “thinking.” (Knorr Cetina, 2014, p. 58).

Some of these attempts to put together the broken pieces of the opaque experience of intellectual invention, moreover, have developed alongside an endeavour to articulate ‘an approach to the teaching of theory that is as effective as the current way of teaching methods’ (Swedberg, 2016, p. 6). Convinced that, since the Second World War, the development of social research methods and of methods for teaching them has prompted the social sciences to make ‘a major leap forward’ (Swedberg, 2016, p 6), sociologist Richard Swedberg (e.g. 2014b, 2015, 2016) has been preoccupied with enabling the making of social theory to make similar ‘progress’. Thus, he has called for a shift in attention from the contents of ‘theory’ to the practice of ‘theorising’ and has produced nothing less than a step-by-step method for theorising in social science which involves observation and selection, the crafting of concepts, the building of a theory, and the testing of the theory’s explanatory power (Swedberg, 2014b, p. 17).

The point of briefly reviewing these attempts here, however, is not to pit them against each other, or to enter into a hair-splitting argument as to their respective virtues and vices. There is in my view little doubt that the event of the coming into existence of a new idea requires a milieu, and that this milieu may even be called social, cultural, intellectual, economic, and neurophysiological. By addressing these attempts, am I not proposing that one should refrain from trying to relate the processes by which certain inventions are developed and achieved. To suggest that the experience of inventing in thought is indeed dramatic and perplexing is not a prohibition against trying to understand and appreciate its unfolding.

The issue is that by turning the question of the relevant characterisation of the experience of thinking into a matter of repairing our broken knowledge of it, these various explanations and operationalisations eschew their perplexing character altogether. Thus, they cannot account for experiences of intellectual invention without simultaneously remaining profoundly at odds with them. With such explanations, perplexity and hesitation are no longer possible– thinking, as presumably everything else, is said to be the result of ‘social mechanisms’, of neurophysiological processes, or indeed, of learning the right method. If there is something dramatic and perplexing about intellectual invention, this appears to be nothing but the expression of an illusion that can be explained away by something else: because we can never be fully aware of how our social conditions influence us, or because we know more than we think we do, or because nobody had previously taught us how to do it properly.

Now, the effect of preventing any hesitant response to such an eventful experience is not, it seems to me, that of laying its opaque insides finally out in the open. It is rather that of betraying the sudden, frightening, risky and perplexing feeling of inventing in thought. In so doing, what is rejected as a matter of principle is not simply the experience of thinking, but what that experience makes *felt*– the fact that, when it happens, something new has come into the world. To the extent that this something is truly *new*, no set of explanations –be them social, neurophysiological, or technical– can be capable of conferring to this thought-event the character of a logical deduction, of reducing it to a range of necessary reasons, as if the reasons themselves had the power of bringing it about (Savransky, 2016; Stengers, 1997).

To betray the perplexity of this experience is therefore to reject the possibility of novelty as such. This matters, because the attempt I am pursuing here, of seeking to craft a relevant characterisation of the experience of inventing in thought, is one that wagers that, if our knowledge is always somewhat broken –such that we always know only a little, some amount, but never everything or nothing– it is not simply because we are ignorant or because we know more than we can tell. Rather, it is because what is to be known is always in the making and thus keeps changing, growing, branching out, multiplying, being born anew. If intellectual invention is the process of the coming into existence of a new idea, perplexity cannot be reduced to a lack of knowledge, but is *immanent* to the experience of inventing in thought. Affirming the possibility of intellectual invention requires, therefore, that we learn to appreciate its perplexing character, we learn not to reduce the becoming of new ideas to what we already know, but to confer on ideas the capacity to make us think.

**The Play of Ideas**

As I have argued above, conferring on ideas the capacity to make us think involves that we resist giving into the temptation of associating the question ‘how does it feel to think?’ with an act of reparation of what we do not quite know about thinking*.* It involves, in other words, that we resist participating in the modern project of what Judith Schlanger (1979: 10) called ‘transversal analyses’, those ‘whose aim is to show that, within the realm of thought, everyone is doing the same thing at the same time, or that a certain region of thought surreptitiously constitutes the key to disclosing another region’. No perplexity concerning the experience of intellectual invention can be solved by saying that there is a social, neurological or technical mechanism that is responsible for it. Wagering that intellectual invention is possible demands that, rather than treating ideas as derivates of neurophysiological or social processes, we attend to the fact that, ‘because it is itself a force and a play, the reality of heuristics is primary’ (Schlanger, 1977, p. 8).

To propose that the reality of heuristics is primary is to suggest that ideas have a mode of existence of their own. To be sure, the play of ideas partakes in a wider milieu, at once neurophysiological, social, cultural, and so on, such that ‘a new proposition is neither comprehensible nor audible except insofar as it is a function of a certain problematic which it contributes to modify, from which it allows an escape’ (Schlanger, 1983, p 228). But insofar as it transforms and recreates the milieu, insofar as it constitutes a difference and the introduction of novelty, the event of intellectual invention cannot be simply *derived* from its milieu: ‘neither a continuity nor a discontinuity, the new is a *difference* that emerges within a multiplicity of problematic relations.’ (Schlanger, 1975: 108).

A play of differences it is indeed. Against those who have contributed to turning the phrase ‘the play of ideas’ into an expression of innocent and idle procrastination, Schlanger’s writings, in the original french, sensibly remind us that to engage in a game or play (*un jeu*) is anything but innocent. By contrast, it is to come to terms with the stakes (*les enjeux*) of this inventive experience. In other words, it reminds us that when we engage in the play of ideas we not only put ideas into play; we not only play them outto see how far they may go. At the same time, we ourselves are put into play by and with them, being forced to hesitate, to think, to explore the possibilities and limits that they themselves make felt. The stakes of conferring on ideas the power to put us into play are not minor either– they involve decisions as to what can be thought, enunciated, made interesting, decisions which are themselves made in the course of this experience (Schlanger, 1975, p.35). For their part, those who will receive such decisions in the form of an accomplished work of intellection are never passive, but will participate in deciding the possible futures that such inventions may enjoy. Hence the risks associated with intellectual invention– incomprehension, marginalisation, disqualification.

To be sure, many academic enterprises carefully seek to minimise or altogether avoid the risks, but as such they simultaneously must avoid the stakes– for they operate with notions that already adhere to a given field of the rational, and they situate themselves within an already established plane of thought. The play of ideas is a risky one and, in the neoliberal university, academics are constantly being advised against it[[2]](#footnote-3). Indeed, when one confers on ideas the power to put one into play, ’is it possible to know, in the midst of the process, whether the endeavour is fecund or just delirious? Can we judge the process without hesitation?’ (Schlanger, 1983, p. 255).

If taking the play of ideas seriously situates us in the middle of the experience of inventing in thought, of finding ourselves inside an ‘it thinks!’ that without asking for permission is already playing us out, then in order to explore this experience we need to invent ways of characterising it from its midst. And such a task, in turn, requires that we create words that are neither analytical nor explanatory, words that do not hasten to divide subject from object, action from passion, or thinking from thought, but which *dramatise* the play of ideas by demanding attention and wonder: words that are themselves ‘dramaturgical notions’ (Schlanger 1977, p. 9). What might this involve?

**Experiencing Intellectual Invention**

James’s ‘it thinks!’ is, in my view, a good example of what Schlanger refers by this dramaturgy. For indeed, to characterise the event of intellectual invention as an ‘it thinks!’ is to resist lapsing into the Cartesian image that requires a personal thinker to be the subject of an act of thinking which has thought as its object. Instead, it seeks to explore the experience of thinking without making a priori distinctions about what is being thought and what is doing the thinking. As such, it also prevents rushed judgements as to who or what is responsible for the coming about of the thought-event, and cultivates a certain curiosity as to what kinds of ideas, and which kinds of thinkers, the event itself may bring about. With the expression ‘it thinks!’, thinking acquires an existence of its own, and subjectivity ceases being the centre of thought to become an *ingredient* in thought.

But there is more. What if instead of prescribing a series of steps to be followed, a number of operations of observation, conceptualisation, theorisation and explanation to be carried out, we were to characterise this obscure art of thinking as a kind of adventure of wandering towards an ‘it thinks!’, towards an event that is not simply awaiting the thinker but itself in the making, shaping the thinker that risks engendering it? I suspect the types of conversation we could have about how it feels to think would indeed change, for characterising an adventure is very different to articulating the necessary steps of a method.

In following this adventure of inventing in thought, we would have to begin not by presenting a set of aims and principles but by attempting to describe the multiple layers of complexity and plurality through which such an adventure might play out. We would have to pay attention, for instance, to what Schlanger (1977, p. 85-86) refers to as the sense of ‘intrigue’ that accompanies the becoming of a thought-event. The intrigue produced by the fact that ‘one never knows in advance where, when, or how the heuristic effervescence will play out’. The intrigue produced by being seduced by words and intuitions without being able to determine in advance whether a thought may succeed in inserting itself within an existing situation and infect it with its novel character, calling the existing definition of the situation into question, restructuring it, transforming it; or whether ‘the new itself’ will become what ‘is rejected and deported elsewhere, culturally exiled to another dimension’.

If even those that approach it as a matter of method agree that thinking and theorising deserve to be called an art (Swedberg, 2015), why not experiment with notions that are relevant to other arts too? The conversation might change if we began to speak of the experience of reading others, of thinking *with* others, thinkers and thoughts, not as a question of accuracy and criticism, or of whether one is imitating the right rhetorical gestures in the correct manner, but as a matter of tonality and resonance. What if what was at stake in learning to think with others, in honouring the capacity for the propositions of others to move us, was the development of a felt ‘affinity or lack of affinity between problems’ (Stengers 2014, p. 194) and modes of problematisation that bring our adventures and those of others into partial forms of togetherness? Might we not even have to recognise that thinking is also felt as a form of excitement or fright running through our body, that it is felt on our skin, our backs, and at the tips of our fingers?

Once we are confronted by this exciting ‘it thinks!’, by this idea that occurs to us and puts us into play, how to characterise this play we have entered into?To be sure, this event is never an achievement without at the same time posing a new kind of problem: how to cultivate this idea? How to extract from the thought-event something that can exist in its own right, that can establish relationships to other concepts, problems, and concerns? It may occasionally be the aim of this process of inventing in thought to arrive at new concepts, propositions, or even some form of explanation, although these are by no means the only products such creative processes can yield. But even if that were the case, the notion of ‘conceptualisation’, often used by those who discuss heuristics as a matter of method and technique, bears the danger of attempting to describe the process backwards– by reducing the indeterminate and uncertain activity of inventing in thought to a mere shadow or intermediary of the ‘concept’ as its outcome.

To dramatise this process, therefore, what would be required is the possibility of imagining a ‘conceptualisation without concepts’ (Schlanger 1977, p.68), of attending to the process of fabricating, from the complex fabric of the ‘it thinks!’, a relation to something whose existence this relation must negotiate. Put differently, a concept can only come into existence as the result of this creative process of enabling an idea to orient us in fabricating a relationship to what is not-yet. Like the crafting of stories, inventing concepts requires what we might call a practice of *fabulation.* To call it a fabulation isnot to suggest that this relationship is arbitrary and hollow, free to become whatever one desires of it. Rather, it is to stress that to the extent that relating to what is not-yet cannot be achieved simply by recourse to the rules of logic, reason, and observation, because, in order to be relevant to what it is inventing, the relation itself must always be fabricated anew.

Thus, ‘it is certainly not for “rational” or “reasonable” reasons’, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994, p.78) rightly remind us, ‘that a particular concept is created’. Precisely at that point where one can no longer deduce or apply what one already knows or what has already been determined, at that point where Reason is out of its depth, to invent a concept is to fabulate an entire ensemble of lines, stories, landscapes, characters, and tensions that form the contour of the problem in relation to which the concept in question is invented. At the same time, to call this a fabulation is also to recall that this experience of conceptual invention cannot be secured in advance, but always fares on a tightrope between the fecund and the delirious. The challenge of inventing concepts, then, belongs less to the progressive acquisition of a certain mastery over the use of metaphors, analogies and extrapolations, than to the ongoing, situated art of learning how to care for precarious and singular life-forms whose fate is never guaranteed.

Finally, can we ever know whether one has succeeded? As I suggested above, one cannot judge the invention while one is in the midst of playing. But if the play (*jeu)* does have stakes (*enjeux)*, then the accomplishment does demand, not a judgement, but an appreciation, a contrast between what can be deemed a success and what constitutes a failure. To the extent that the notion of ‘explanation’ is seen as ‘the natural end of the theorizing process’ (Swedberg, 2014b, p. 17), the primary criteria of success tend to be, no doubt, those of truth and falsehood. But here, once again, taking the dramatic play of ideas seriously forces us to consider that the mode of appreciation that marks the difference between the success and the failure of an adventure of inventing in thought must itself change. If the risks are indeed associated with the difference between lucidity and nonsense, the mode of appreciation must change because what does not make sense can be neither true nor false, and asking whether a *novelty* is ‘true’, that is, whether it corresponds to a *pre-existing* state of affairs, is itself nonsense. Rather than ask ‘is this true?’, perhaps the appreciation of a successful play of ideas might belong to other, more relevant, questions: Is this invention interesting? Is it important? Is this invention generative or destructive? Does this concept call for other concepts? Does it provoke new adventures or thwart those of others who are in the process of attempting to think?

**Conclusion: Learning to Think, or The Reinstatement of The Vague**

Play, invention, adventure, risk, intrigue, resonance, affinity, excitement, fabulation, lucidity, interest, importance– might these words open up the possibility of a different kind of conversation about how it feels to think? Much more, of course, could be said. Other dramaturgical notions may become relevant. Nevertheless, a critical reader with little affinity for what I have here attempted might rightly reply that, if they do open up a different conversation, then this would not be one enhanced by the kind of rigour that analysis and methodology may provide, but would be one marred by vagueness. It does not tell us precisely how or what to think, and it offers no explanation as to why thinking feels as it often does. I would have to agree, with the caveat that, like Schlanger (1977, p. 16), I believe that in this case ‘the risk of (temporary) vagueness seems preferable to the risk of reduction.’ Methodological rigour, here, is *rigor mortis.*

If what was at stake in this experiment was to try and characterise the behind-the-scenes experience of thinking that would not betray the perplexity that the event of a new idea generates, then perhaps one of the provocations that risking vagueness involves is to prevent us from conflating ‘transparency’ with clear-cut discriminations. In openly wishing that he could speak of the eventful experience of thinking as one speaks of the event of rain, James’s desire was indeed to be able to more transparently attend to the feeling of thinking. But as he insisted, this could *not* be done by decomposing the stream of thought into clear-cut components and procedures. As he urged instead, ‘[i]t is, in short, the re-instatment of the vague in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention.’ (James, 1950[1890], p. 254). What I have tried to disclose throughout this essay is that providing a relevant characterisation of this feeling we call ‘thinking’ is a challenging task– one that demands that we experiment with unusual words and notions, and that we find alternative modes expression to those that our received sociological wisdoms would advise.

And this is because the experience of thinking *is* vague. It is exciting, frightening, and perplexing. For the same reason, learning to think, to think in and through research, even to ‘theorise*’,* can in my view hardly be characterised, let alone learned, in the way one describes and learns a method. The latter requires dedication, good will, premeditated decisions, and a relation of submission to and imitation of a master example that we are exhorted to follow. When learning to think is at stake, however, ‘[w]e learn nothing from those who say: ‘Do as I do’. Our only teachers are those who tell us ‘do with me’, and emit signs to be developed in heterogeneity rather than propose gestures for us to reproduce.’ (Deleuze, 1994, p. 23). The mode of apprenticeship proper to the vague and dramatic experience of thinking seems thus to demand something entirely different– that one takes the risk of entering into the play of ideas not to control it, or to master them, but to learn how to *compose* *with* ideas, how to enable them to enable us to extract from that vague experience relevant contrasts, and to fabulate connections, that may allow for something interesting, something important, something new, to exist.

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1. Including their social and cultural backgrounds, their educational paths, and even the self-narratives and concepts that thinkers occasionally produce and hold about themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For example, a recent article offering ‘ten tips’ on how to build an ‘academic reputation’, published in *The Times Higher Education*, includes many tips that are fundamentally about avoiding the risk of play, such as identifying ‘the right space’ of specialism, ‘choosing a tribe’ to which one is supposed to belong and thus distinguish friends from foes ‘for life’, befriending ‘a local chieftain’ of the chosen tribe, an so forth (Macintosh, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)