

1. Difficult Beginning

It is a hot, muggy, overcast day and I sit here in my little room sweating profusely. At the same time I look for some sort of inspiration, some sort of meaning, some sort of direction, indeed, some sort of future for myself. For the fact of the matter is that, right now, right at this point in my life, I'm afraid of the future, afraid of my age and my aging, afraid of, to speak figuratively for a moment, putting to flight all the romantic songbirds of my soul. Afraid of – and still speaking figuratively – going out of this life not with a bang but a whimper. Is it any wonder then that, mindful of my youthful dreams and what has guided me thus far, I wish more than ever now for a bright star before me?

And what could this bright star be if not, somehow renewed and revitalized, my long-held wish to be a great writer and thinker? A wish that, in my youthful and, indeed, not-so-youthful imagination, was hardly to be distinguished from a both erotic and egoistic fantasy, from imagining a life for myself of high adventure, heroism, and romance? It was in fact upon this rather heterogeneous and even conflicting basis that I set the whole course of my life and imagined at the same time that it would turn out to be, in its own way, cumulative, solid, and substantial. I imagined that it would resemble – on the spiritual plane if not the material – a large tree with an ever-greater number of growth rings.

But for some time now it seems that a part of me has grown cold to all this and, viewing the erotic if not the romantic as being more on the side of normal pursuits than exalted ones, is ready to lurch towards them like a lecher and let go all vain longings and imaginings of the higher sort. While this tendency or temptation has always been alive in me to some extent, it is only recently that it became so strong that I finally caught sight of myself being undone in a spiritual and possibly even worldly sense. That is, by turning myself into – and this no doubt needs to be handled delicately and worked out at length – what is not heroic or not even trying to be heroic but simply successful, professional, sociable, competent, respectable, and well-off.

It is by way of countering this cold front now moving in upon me – this fear of old age, an uncertain future, the loss of a more idealistic and youthful self – that I take on a very personal yet also very philosophical task. A task which is not only one with the subject of myself but the subject of truth-telling. A task which, because of this identification of the personal and the philosophical, cannot avoid a certain amount of self-indulgence on the one hand (as the personal) and presumption, obscurity, and dilatoriness on the other (as the philosophical). A task which, because it is not just about

truth but *truthtelling*, cannot be other than complicated and even over-complicated. A task therefore complicated and even over-complicated by resistance to these same negative but necessary traits.

Traits which, while being unacceptable to *truthtelling* in a predominantly social, polemical, formal, and idealized sense, are also – and this is the whole crux of the matter – ineluctably part of *truthtelling*. On this last point I can only be firm and dogmatic. I have no more possibility of escaping this particular trait than the ones just mentioned. I have no more possibility of being utterly free of a disputable starting point (which for me can only be *indisputable*) than other *truthtellers*. So it is that, if I'm to tell the truth about *truthtelling*, I must insist that these traits be both accomplices in the telling as well as elements resisted in it. And this must be done in the face of others who naturally and rightfully insist that these traits have no place in *truthtelling*.

Of course this strategy of playing both ends against the middle gives me a lot of leeway. But how else can I manage this unwieldy subject? How else can I tell the truth about something which is by nature multi-faceted, multi-factual, conflict-ridden, changeable, often hegemonic in bearing and yet at the same time subversive and unending? How else but by simply finding out what my liberty and licence are – as well as my limits – as I go along? But of course this involves an extraordinary trust in myself which, despite many lost and wayward moments, I have managed to work up over the years. And although this trust or faith is no guarantee of doing this task well (it goes without saying I'll never do it completely), it must be, as it always is for such enterprises, the gage thrown down with the confidence or recklessness of a try me.

For some reason which should be thoroughly looked into even now, my highest ambitions and aspirations have always been in excess of my talents and abilities. For many years I have found myself acting a bit like Kierkegaard's knight of faith. To say what this means in a few words is to say that, even though I have never been able to win the princess because I have always gone about it the wrong way, I have kept believing I could win her if I went about it the right way. Which meant, as that faith that cannot properly account for itself (or, as Kierkegaard calls it, the paradoxical leap), persisting in the way that has been mine thus far.

But just as there is no easy way to determine who or what this princess is or whether she is more spiritual than material or idealistic than erotic, so there is no easy way to determine what this *thus far* is. What this crooked path I

have taken up to now is or has been or whether it belongs more to the present than to the past or to the past than to the present. After all, the fact that I dignify this present by calling it *On Truthtelling* does not in any way prevent the inexorable melding of past and present. It does not do so because both the *thus far* and the past, however truthfully told, cannot be told without prejudice and filling in lacunae. This admission already makes it clear that my project is compromised or is a compromising of itself so serious and radical that, were it not for the fact that I believe that all truthtelling is so compromised, I would have to make a second admission and say I have no right to dignify this present way with the title I have.

This leaves me thinking that I'm forced to go on with this task simply because no one else has done it. A task which I'm not at all clear about and yet presumably clear enough about to say that it should be seen as a response to a call to duty and to something very personal. To something very particular, complex, concealed, and concealing. At one and the same time then it seems I'm taking a voyage towards a land already known and, on the other hand, putting my bark in an endless sea for which it is unfit. Were I not to think that all truthtellers are essentially in the same boat, I surely would abandon this frail bark and board some sturdier vessel.

It is shaping up already that, despite whatever sincerity I can bring to this subject, I risk parodying it. And yet I feel there is no other way to get closer to it or to what is essentially intractable about it. A seemingly more serious, sure-footed, step-by-step approach is no doubt appropriate when telling the truth about X or the truth about Truth or, for that matter, the truth about the A, B, C of Being. But when it comes to telling the truth about truthtelling, there can be no violent elimination of such complicating factors as the contradictory, the inconvenient, the illogical, and the invented. Or at least there can be no such elimination except by those who are not willing to question their faith in an admittedly indispensable part of truthtelling which goes by the name of Reason.

And now it strikes me that, with this belief I have that, however indispensable reason is to truthtelling, it is not exclusively so and not even to the point of excluding its opposite, there is something rather specific for me to look into. Obviously many people don't share this belief and, since there is no reason to think that they are any less indispensable than I am to truthtelling, it becomes a question why they are what they are and why I am what I am.

And now it comes to me that this particular question itself is suggestive of

an answer. At least it seems to suggest that, with respect to the distinction I have just given myself as a truth-teller, there is a certain ego fixation, a certain ethical, psychological, or physiological orientation, a certain sign of health which can also be a maddening and even disabling affliction, and a certain desire to distinguish myself from others even to the detriment of myself. On the other hand, a contrary element is registered at the very same instant and, moreover, one which could even be called objective. Objective to the extent that it is one with the subject of truth-telling and, more precisely, one with its being dealt with in such a way that the inseparability of truth from the telling of it is taken very seriously. What this ultimately means is that, in order to be as thorough as possible in dealing with the matter of this inseparability, it must be treated as being inclusive of the subject which is me and the telling which is mine.

But how do I go about drawing myself into the picture without simply drawing a vulgar picture of myself? Or for that matter, how can I avoid not drawing such a picture if it happens to be part of what should be drawn? With this last question, I cannot help but think of Rousseau's criticism of Montaigne and the latter's presumed lack of candour. It wasn't a fair criticism because the times Montaigne was living in were not conducive to admitting the most unseemly aspects of one's private life. On the other hand, if this criticism were redirected towards somebody doing a similar project in the twenty-first century, it would surely be telling. After all, how could one nowadays claim to be painting oneself *tout nu* without revealing the most perverse, unseemly, and humiliating parts of oneself?

As far as I can see, however, the telling of the truth about myself even as a matter of telling the worst can only be guided by one principle. Dedicated as I am to having the best view of myself in a formal or objective sense, I'm at once undeniably and unavoidably ruled by the desire to take the best view of myself in a more personal sense. To think I could do otherwise, to think I could carry on without also carrying along a best view of myself as more or less flattering self-image would already be a defeat, a counter to truth-telling. Everything good or bad about me then can only come to light solely through the view of myself as the present subject struggling hard to be one with the subject of truth-telling.

It now seems appropriate to explain how I got to this subject and how it has taken hold of me the way it has. Explain it not as a preliminary or limited move, however, but as the very attempt to deal with the subject itself. For how can I explain how I got to the present subject without immediately involving myself in it? How can I explain how I arrived at it without at the

same time trying to explain why others didn't or, for that matter, didn't even want to? How can I do all this without in a sense going beyond explanation and giving a subjective account which tries to have the same dimensions as an objective one?

What is required then is some line of thought always bearing on truth-telling and yet taking me from the present to the past and back again. A line of thought so unwieldy as to be best introduced by a question. A rather presumptuous, self-flattering, and egoistic question yet, as I believe, a question which goes straight to the heart of my intractable subject. A question which, as I have already intimated, should be handled delicately and worked out at length. A question such as the following: *why should the heroic, such as I named it before and presume to understand it, seem so important to my present undertaking and why should it seem to stretch out over my life and even beyond?*

If I look back towards earliest childhood, I see nothing extraordinary to account for this state of affairs apart from my incessant, diverse, and wide-ranging fascination with the heroic or rather with something like it. Something much larger and more nebulous and which itself can be called the extraordinary. In saying this of course, I'm not really distinguishing myself from anyone else or at least, if I'm doing so, it is only to the extent that I'm able or allowed to accentuate this fascination and give it a certain trajectory.

If I ask myself what is the extraordinary and its relation to truth-telling, then I'm no better off than if I ask myself the same question about the heroic. Either question is bound up with an account of truth-telling which is also an account of telling the truth about this subject itself. Hence it is one with the subject *of* myself. If I were to start talking about the extraordinary as if I knew what it was apart from the subject *of* myself, I would be generalizing about it on the basis of an obscure area *in* myself without telling the truth about it.

But apart from pointing this area out and admitting to it, how does one tell the truth about it? It seems that one can do so only in a rather mixed or uncertain way and yet only if one chooses one of two ways which usually pass each other like two ships in the night. Two ways of truth-telling which have the distinct character of appearing totally different in the eyes of some and very similar in the eyes of others and, in both cases, with almost an equal number of trained and untrained eyes upon them. With respect to the first, a certain faith in reason holds sway and, with respect to the second, a certain non-faith. But no more does the first manifest itself solely by way of

reason than does the second without it.

If I call the first way *speculation* and the second way *storytelling*, then I have already consigned the whole of truth-telling to dealing with the obscure. At the same time it must be admitted that, in speculating myself as I'm doing right now, truth-telling is not primarily understood in the sense of what it is or can be at various stations and along various paths, but only in the sense of what it is or can be as disclosure of origins and ends. Not as repetition but only as *revelation* does truth-telling run up against the obscure and only in such a way that revelation itself must be both repeated and not repeated.

In such a way then I must approach my own situation and its relation to the obscure. I must look into the origins and ends of myself as best as I can. But how do I go about this task which itself seems so obscure? Am I to use the seemingly different paths of speculation and storytelling in order to shed as much light on the subject as possible? Am I to develop some way of proceeding which would allow these two paths to run alongside each other and perhaps coincide? This is a question I don't really know how to answer except by striking out on one or both of these paths and seeing what happens.

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