

11. Reasoning on Order

And now it strikes me how all this Byzantine reasoning about madness cuts against the grain, raises doubts and question marks largely because it doesn't address the subject in general. The ideal of truth-telling is so much the ideal of having this general or universal truth, of having the truth about madness per se that a report on the particular seems to be saying too little. Undoubtedly a prejudice is at work here of such magnitude and power that it systematically prescribes to us the presumption of thinking we can grasp the whole of which we are but a part. No greater lack of humility could there be than this and yet it runs through every human being as much as anything that could be called its opposite. There is nothing to condemn here on the one hand and yet, on the other, everything. Truth-telling takes into itself the ethics of this and is, from one point of view, the condemnation and, from another, the reprieve or pardon. So am I caught up in this same double register and, as much I want to become clear of it, condemn and am condemned.

Few have worked as hard as I to grasp the whole even while seeing before their very eyes that it rendered them null and void as an artist. The complexity of the general, the philosopher's domain, distracted me from the complexity of the particular, the artist's. It made me drastically impoverish and undernourish the latter as much as it made me overburden it.

When I look back on my collection of notes for *Hooked on Hell in the Land of Golden Promises*, I'm both surprised and dismayed by how much of what I tried to work out there is thin and underdeveloped. It is as if I wanted to say everything I could about evil, madness, and corrupting influences while ignoring the task of painting their innermost processes. Broad statements and broad thoughts cluttered up and confused what should have been the welding of thought to intention, to motivation, to situation, to upbringing, to character, to moment-to-moment emotional and environmental changes. To the level where art functions as the great truth so often kept hidden from us: that eternity is in the moment as much as the moment in eternity.

But this veering towards the big picture was my natural bent and so, as a playwright, I finally came to a dead end. When I tried to direct myself to doing less ambitious pieces – short sketches or monologues suitable for the summer fringe festival in Winnipeg – it was like looking at a blank wall. Even the recent death of my second-oldest sister by her own hand couldn't inspire me in this direction. Or, for that matter, the death of my father in Ireland that, strangely enough, occurred almost at the same time. In addition to my personal relationships with my father and sister, their lived lives and the sad situation that existed between them would have surely provided me with

more than enough material. Yet these two human beings who had possibly been more akin to me than any others couldn't rouse me, even in their seemingly twinned deaths, to the feeling of great artistry. Even then I must have wanted a subject greater than any other and, not having it, I felt like a stone mason before uncut jewels. All the world continued to pour out its noisy and confused message as if I were somehow responsible for making a report on it that, at least in my own eyes, would finalize matters.

Never let it be said that order didn't have its place in my life and keep me from such plummeting falls as my brother experienced. From earliest childhood I lived and breathed it every day insofar as my mother kept a house like a well-kept ship. Impossible to find a particle of dust in that modest bungalow and even the partly-finished basement was forever in order. Coming into our house was always the mosque-like thing of taking off one's shoes and, as far as pets go, well, they didn't exist. So protective of our domicile was she that, when a fire broke out one time and swept over the large field out back, she tried to put it out with a garden hose. And it goes without saying that my brother, my three sisters, and I were never without clean clothes, mended if need be but never threadbare. Yes, the physical environment was always orderly and, for most of my childhood in Chambly, so was the spiritual. To this day I remember the loss I felt when volume three of our twenty-volume encyclopaedia was left outside and destroyed by the rain. If there were a children's bible in our house, this was it. And along with my many hobbies there was stamp collecting. I was intrigued by sorting out little pieces of paper with pictures on them according to country, series, and date of issue. Such and other activities were ingrained in me and whatever fell into the opposite camp never was so tumultuous as to throw me off them.

Were it not for a valuation of the orderly in one's life, I doubt whether anyone would carry on a contemplation of the whole. In fact what I noticed while I was cab driving over many years was that, amongst poor people, there was a singular lack of interest in or commentary about it. Or at least amongst those who formed a definite underclass shorn of a religious perspective and middle-class prospects. Often rough-talking and dissolute in their habits, their philosophical moments were limited to a commonplace (and often crude-sounding) ethics of behaviour. So much *mis*behaviour along with its attendant problems was their lot that it blocked off all communication between innermost thought and outermost circumstances. Any attempt to bring these two together that didn't reach them at the level of a grandiose promise and concern for their personal well-being would have been doomed to look ridiculous and out of place.

An under-valuation and over-valuation of order then depending upon where you're sitting. A living room so ill-kept that it offends the eye. Another so well-kept that it bans being lived in. And if this living room is not just a room in a house but the world we inhabit, then order or orderliness is a controversy, an issue, a bone of contention, a class distinction right from the very beginning. But since power normally goes on the side of order and since part of having this order and power is having the big picture, then order is projected right into the heart of things: order is power and power order.

That the valuation of order is the movement towards its idealization is also the space for every contesting or contingent possibility. A certain breeding of disorder then that might be called the state of the well-kept living room as liveable or lived-in space. As much for those who think they can comfortably embrace all in their truth as for those who think that nothing could be more uncomfortable than to be so embraced.

But we're all one thing and another and there is much slippage. Taking in the whole, no matter how it is done, is always to some extent resistance to being taken in from some other quarter. The traditionalist, for example, fights not to be inscribed in modernity or postmodernity. As much as my sympathies may not be with him in a good many respects, I can identify with him on the basis of this simple resistance to being taken in.

So it was that with this valuation of order I stretched myself towards the future despite whatever errant track I was on. Good bourgeois notions and habits stayed with me to the extent that I could view them as being practically useful and worldly wise while at the same time as being deficient. Already then I was living my life as a critique of the order principle that was neither disrespectful of it nor idolatrous.

I was living it not as all can or should or must. This statement can only be stated in this simple way for the sake of convenience. Only degrees of difference make the difference between throwing the emphasis on difference and not doing so. Stretching from the objective to the subjective standpoint, the difference amounts to authorizing one's difference.

The idolatrous majority, were they not idolatrous, would never have the will or faith or wherewithal to do the good work of striving – however much all they do may one day come under fire or be consigned to it – for the best of all possible worlds. Which is another way of saying I'm too well aware of the limited usefulness of my own way not to think that minority status is what is

best for it.

But with my incurable desire to grasp the whole, what do I see but that truth-telling as social, historical, and even biological event is immensely practical and in such a way that it enfolds disparate elements. So much so that it includes the marginalised or minority ones as well as continually escaping the more or less common or commonsense notion of practicality. The one that comes from a limited perspective and is itself an idealization. Or rather part and parcel of an even *larger* idealizing scene that it conveniently forgets while forever being in debt to it. So it is that, while things fall out this way at one end of the spectrum, they fall out differently at the other. Practicality is not borne so naively at this larger end of viewing. Not limited, that is, to seeing and recognizing things as self-evident but played out towards the theoretical as the proper grounding of these. Here is definitely the larger reach of practicality – of truth-telling as the practical – in that whatever is taken to be self-evident is continually being *reassured* of its status. But since this effort is largely the idealizing one of finding truth in and of itself, it cannot but turn its back on such extraneous motives as pertain to the practical. It cannot be or at least cannot make itself out to be other than pure act and intention.

With this bit of coverup and deceit always playing into the idealizing process, a counter-movement is called forth that is paradoxically one with this process and yet its eternal nemesis. As a striving to be pure act and intention, as a falling short of such, as the admission of the *non*-admission of forever having to fall short, the transparency to itself in all these matters is the dominant theme in at least *one* strain of truth-telling. Threatening to make pure act and intention an act of self-condemnation, it resonates throughout the whole of truth-telling as this sacrificially charged element.

Well, if I flatter myself that these thoughts are the fruit of long reflection, it is not without being aware that they themselves testify to a certain lack of order or aversion to it or prejudice against it. The perfect order in thinking doesn't exist but it certainly can be simulated and hit the mind with a rare force. In such instances it seems that all is unerring message that identifies part and whole and relates one to the other in a successful and successive way. This machine-like truth-telling is the indispensable background to a certain freedom from it. To whatever may range from simple adjustment to hostile rejection, from fine tuning to throwing in a monkey wrench. When I state it as such, when I ratchet up this order principle to the status of an indispensable background, it seems to me that I'm far from having a prejudice against it. On the other hand, the fact that I describe it as

machine-like inevitably slights and takes away from all who sweat and strain over precision parts and juggernaut effects. Even the most innocent and quietistic are caught up in this description that tends to associate them with spiritual narrowness and despotism.

Everything that stands against me and counts as order and hasn't been mastered by me counts against me. A gross ignorance and incompetence that all are faced with even if some reduce them in remarkable ways. It may even be as a reaction to this that I (as well as others) want to catch hold of and master the disorderly *as* disorderly. A singular illusion of course that invites ridicule as much as it allows the god-like approach to and perception of what is beyond order.

It is somewhere here that the extremely intellectual approach to truth-telling pivots one way or the other. The most common way is that of a hypertrophied order principle that sees if not realizes its freedom in its majestic force and realizes if not sees its freedom in its less than majestic *use* of force. In the first instance it is assumed innocence and purity that merely asks for a corresponding allegiance or acceptance. In the second it is a working or warring principle that seeks out acceptance tactically, strategically, and self-righteously.

But heaven forbid that the order principle should view itself as being hypertrophied or war-like. Its uncanny nature is to be itself by forever fighting to be the ideal of itself. Fighting then to be essentially a *non*-fighting or *non*-violent principle and so fighting all that would deny it as such. Fighting then with much in itself that is muted or denied. With a certain blindness that is far from being eradicable because, even though it may be pointed to and traced out indefinitely, its ideality is always one with rigorously proving the contrary.

Everything comes into play here: it is a serious charge to make out that the majority of truth-tellers are blind. Their usefulness and hard work speaks to them otherwise. It castigates the nay-sayer and wants to dethrone him as much as he would seem to want to dethrone them. And of course none of this is seen by these truth-tellers as a departure from principle but rather as the principle departed on a holy and just mission.

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