

12. Personal Mission

Many are able to see others with keen eyes but few are able to see themselves so. It is on this basis that I hold forth as I do and not because I have great expertise in even those areas most closely related to my subject.

So it is that, having studied myself closely enough to catch myself acting blindly, I feel better qualified than most who have looked into or, should I say, have *not* looked into my subject (which of course I don't treat simply as *my* subject) to offer an authoritative opinion.

But not much else than this for, whatever I may make of it or however much I esteem it, it in some sense rules against me.

My authoritative opinion is that there is a general blindness that, as much as I or anyone else would wish to escape it (by escaping the realm of mere opinion), haunts me or the other with the sharper eyes of yet *another* authoritative opinion.

And what is it to be blind to oneself in that almost wilful and practised way if not to want another thing so badly that one denies or minimizes whatever conflicts with it?

But why doth "truth generate hatred" . . . unless that truth is in that kind loved, that they who love anything else would gladly have that which they love to be the truth?

In my own case I can say that this conflict between truth as thing-loved and thing-loved as truth hasn't been noticed by me too much for I have always felt, rightly or wrongly, that I have incorporated this conflict into my consciousness. Now while this probably doesn't make me *that* much different from other truth-tellers, I rule – how else can I put it? – that it does.

I have never wanted anything so badly, never been tempted or put myself in a position to be tempted so badly, as to be willing to forego even for a short period the most intimate contact with myself.

What I'm doing now is navigating my ship I know not where with the never-ending hope of a brilliant success. Coupled with the desire for romantic adventures and rapturous sexual encounters that never quite came off, my whole life has been this rather tawdry combination of overreaching underachievement.

I'm condemned to play on the two registers of superiority and inferiority. As

much as I could dispense with the ideal of living as a Hamlet could I dispense with this ambivalence.

There is a whole mountain before me called what others think and do. Coming back from Europe was in a sense coming to the foot of this mountain and beginning the slow climb up. What a poor man's trip and adventure lay before me! Had I viewed it in a crystal ball at the time, it would have been such a disillusionment that I doubt very much I could have borne it. Not that I look back on the second half of my life with anything like shame but, from the perspective of what I was thinking and hoping for at age twenty-five, it would have been romantically insufficient. For youth wants youth in its dreams and it would have seemed to me that all my youth was riddled with too much failure and with successes of only minor note. What consolation would there have been in knowing that I had stayed true to myself? That I had kept up the faith when all it did was bring me to an unfulfilled middle or, as it may be, old age? What consolation would there have been in knowing that I had lived heroically when such a mode of living was presumably so difficult to recognize that it never earned me the love and respect of an earthly princess?

No, it would have seemed to me then that I hadn't scored highly enough in a worldly sense and that having pre-knowledge of this was a curse that only could be lifted by somehow forgetting or ridding myself of it. For no more could I have lived without my illusions than I could have lived without my ideals: it was the two together that gave me whatever strength I had to cut my proper path.

I contend now that this path was the one of learning all I could about truth-telling. But before going on about this (and presumably on and on), I must risk retracting this statement or at least the boldness inherent in it. For it falls into an area that is mixed and uncertain enough to lack a complete character of its own and that therefore must be presented, if it is to have such a character, with an exorbitance and recklessness that I wouldn't normally associate with truth-telling. *It is as if I had no choice but to give the past a stiffer backbone than it actually had in order to support the great lolling head of this subject.*

Which means something like, as Nietzsche said, making a virtue out of one's vices. Calling strong and good what others might very well call weak and bad. In effect, I have been doing this all along by valuing errancy more than is commonly the case and making it integral to dealing with the subject of truth-telling.

It occurs to me now that this “more than is commonly the case” must refer to errancy in its relation to formalized truth-telling. Whether the latter is strictly going to school or not, whether it is narrowly inscribed in an institution or widely out in the world, it is still adherence to a hypertrophied order principle.

In a piecemeal way I have been working up to the point where I can say that *my prejudice against professionalism is the stiffer backbone I must give to the past*. The character-strengthening treatment of the past that both comes from and returns to what I’m presently doing has a certain practicality as the latter’s way of dealing with this past. But, apart from this, it is also a force in my life that has carried me for so long and so far that, when I look back at it, when I look at it in relation to all else around me, I view it as a prodigy.

Professionalism: the non-heroic and the non-honest, the play of politics – this was and is my prejudice. It was defining my life before I even knew it, before I even half-suspected that I was the continuation and perhaps even radicalization of this same prejudice, raised to the level of a principle, in my father. Not that I remember ever thinking he wasn’t a professional when I was a child growing up and when he went off to work every day at a company called Pratt & Whitney. But this rank or status so far as I understood it then and so far as I attributed it to him was like an image without definition, a mode of comportment without title or function, a thing divided against itself as quarrelsome part to resistant whole.

Professionalism: where people excelled in certain areas and progressively declined in all others. Where polished and prepared speech took the place of freshness and originality and half-lies to others the sounding of oneself. Where calculation counted for more than candour or creativity and an ignoble success a noble defeat. Where machine-like efficiency drew the blood out of people’s lives, faces, and words in such a way that they resembled manikins in motion – frozen forms of an organizational identity.

With the freedom of a child growing up as I did in Chambly and with this prejudice in me in however embryonic a form, I must have at least had an inkling that I would have to find or invent for myself a different course. For to be so overtaken and constituted by this prejudice made me in some sense hostile to a straight well-demarcated route. At the same time the ramifications of this hostility in terms of future difficulties and sacrifices were not anywhere in my sight. Accordingly the route per se, the route as road, highway, path to the future, line of development and ongoing discovery remained an illustrious opening, a glorious adventure promised to the few

who were intrepid and noble of spirit.

The poet's and scholar's eye upon the world and the contention therein. The one ready to study and take its delight where it may. The other conditioned to a more disciplined and systematic approach. I'm sure that, well before I could make the distinction between these two, I was equally committed to both. Committed then to a kind of opposition whose indeterminate character was at once a calling and a challenge. Whose roots were in my father's own character and whose first fruits, if they may be called that, were whatever I had observed in or about him that seemed to have been badly planted and ill-grown.

Looking back to where I started with this project and ahead to where I still must go with it, I see the needle of the norm of truth-telling continually pointed towards excess and over-devotion. Whole institutions and schools of thought are built up on a chimaera, a holy something where hyperbole and hypostasis are the order of the day, where the modesty of a doubt or question or admission of ignorance is not tolerated. To turn away from this excess and over-devotion then must necessarily be a deviant move. One that may fly off to any quarter and have great or little effect. It is at the same time always the potentially charged moment of greatest freedom that, as reaction to the hegemonic, is ethical and idealistic and continually redemptive.

Truth-telling is complication and even over-complication but the most general simplifying move is adherence to a hypertrophied order principle. With this statement I think I have come some way to positioning myself as a truth-teller in relation to other truth-tellers. It also goes some way to addressing the question I posed at the beginning about heroicizing myself. If I'm not to underplay this point and if I'm to get at its significance, I must avoid being tempted to assume the admittedly more attractive role of being heroic without talking about it. For while other truth-tellers can afford the luxury of being modest and discreet in their heroic and herculean undertakings, I would not only be less than truthful in following their example (if this were at all possible), but deprived of the one single admirer I can rely on, namely, myself. This last remark would be frivolous only if I were to think that I wasn't involved in a great effort or that such efforts didn't require admirers of at least an imagined sort.

An impossible-lonely mission is what I embarked on and, were I not the hero to myself, I would have long since abandoned it. To find out all I could about truth-telling was pretty much to forego the trappings of success and live my

life torn between voluptuous desires and moral rectitude. To be pressed from within by a force that was not always intelligible to me and made me question why I was so obedient to it rather than to the way of the world. To jump around in all manner of discourses high and low looking for all possible signs of my barely discernible subject. To think I was now a failed artist, now a lifelong student, now an unproductive one or the other, now and forever the falling short of my highest aims and aspirations.

What had been and continued to be my strategy as a young man amounted to two deceptively simple things: learn as much I could and prevaricate as little as possible. Learning for me was never dissociated from feeling and prevaricating from half-truths and omissions. Small wonder then that, upon returning from Europe, I wasn't tempted to plunge into a profession or to take advantage of any quick opportunity to better my situation. This was true despite the fact that I was far from feeling an antipathy to one or the other, far from thinking that a good position or material gain wasn't something to be coveted. Indeed, it would be most true to say that I wanted these things but only by virtue of following some strange irregular uncertain path. Some highly individual way of climbing to success that, as I imagined it, was integral to carrying everything off to the highest degree.

At an age where others have finished their university studies and are ready to launch their careers, I modestly launched my far from modest career as a university student. At the time I considered the taking of evening classes to be complementary to the task of developing myself as a playwright. Admittedly my thinking was fuzzy and limited on this point: it went only so far as to conceive an ever-greater fund of knowledge as an ever-greater reservoir from which to draw artistically. Here was a blindness that came from misjudging my status as a developing playwright, from thinking it was the proper direction and most thorough manifestation of my highest aims and aspirations. Considering that I evinced few signs of talent in this area and that, on the other hand, I did well at university, I suspect that I was being guided by a complicated drive or development, an intellectual, imaginative, and emotional configuration not always conscious of itself and more singular and far-reaching than anything but a retrospective or teleological view can take in.

But I feel compelled to keep reiterating that the latter is never innocent, never a complete viewing without shaping or making, without converging egoistic and idealistic elements. Hence I will say that, while whatever I desired in my life was out of proportion to what I accomplished in it, the latter was nevertheless considerable. I will even go so far as to say that,

because of its ties to my highest aims and aspirations, my accomplishments have always been considerably *hidden*. First of all, as a construction worker who was happy to be one. As one who worked hard and exulted in his strength. As one who, in line with his occupations of the past, could always give free rein to his thoughts and feelings. Who didn't have to pretend that the first had no relation to the second or that truth as best argument was the whole of truth rather than a half-truth. Who rubbed shoulders and broke bread with others who told the truth even in the midst of their prejudices and their ignorance because they didn't attempt to hide these. Who kept faith with his senses as best tutor to how he should pattern his thoughts and nurture his highest hopes. Who didn't shrink from the idea of a long period of incubation and interior cultivation even at the expense of the outer. Who welcomed an honest day's work more than a holiday and seeing things through and well done more than a smooth ride and easy recompense.

Why did I fritter away my time doing manual labour when I could have been devoting it to the pure discipline of the mind? To throw out such a question is to catch various moments of my flight over long years where I would cast doubt upon my course. On all such occasions it would seem to me that to weather these doubts was part of my adventure and experiment, part of telling the truth to myself. And I don't think for a minute that I ever thought I was impervious to these doubts, that they wouldn't have directed me onto another path if such and such conditions had prevailed. For it was never far from my thinking that where a person happens to be, who he knows, and how much money he has can make all the difference between following Plan A and Plan B. In the matter of truth-telling (but not only in the matter of truth-telling), it can make the difference between being an eccentric in the unflattering or dismissive sense and converting one's eccentricity into successful work.

Not having – but only in a formal sense – an outstanding learning and working environment compatible with my sensibilities, I was more or less thrown upon my own devices. A drive to pure self-presence or self-transparency lay at the bottom of all I thought at any given moment. Whether I was acting in a most disciplined way or filled with lust and not particularly averse to giving it free rein, the video camera of my mind rolled incessantly. At the same time I fostered a systematic approach to my studies as book learning that started on the margins and, after a very long, mixed, and interrupted run, ended up gaining the kind of play, precedence, and programming that, superficially judged, resembled the end of eccentricity. Another strand of my loose strategy in life was to combine seeing as widely as possible with seeing certain things as close up as possible. Just how the

second relates to the first is so vast and complicated that, even though or perhaps for the very reason that it is highly personal, I feel justified in taking it as the vast backyard of truth-telling. While others ignore this subjective domain in order to fill the world with reports on all manner of things (including the subjective side of everything but their own truth-telling) based on the ideal of objectivity, I must make this backyard my principal field of exploration. I must be more scrupulous than others have been in the matter of why and how and where something issues forth as the truth being told.

First of all, let us make no mistake about this "seeing things as widely as possible." Let us not pretend that it was ever something unwavering, homogeneous, and unequivocal even in a formalized sense. Let us only go so far as to think that it was more Aristotelian than it knew itself to be, more in conformity with what often passes as the common sense view of the world and is derivative of the Aristotelian tradition as much as the latter is derivative of it. For the longest time then I was no metaphysical maverick, no adherent of any doctrine but the one dividing the mental from the physical and having both the senses and language represent the second to the first.

My situation was analogous then to those many thinkers who put their thoughts on literature, poetry, and private life to the side while attempting to see the world in comprehensive detail. Like them I saw a basic discontinuity between the first and the second, between particulars that called upon reason only in a contingent way and the whole that demanded its presumably pure application. To ignore this discontinuity between two modes of thinking seemed to entail an inevitable shift to mythology or mysticism with a corresponding renouncement of the use of reason as man's historical birthright and coming into his own.

With a few simple lines one can sketch out the Western philosophical tradition and make it seem a summary affair. Perhaps this aspect of it partly explains why I didn't rush to a study of it. The feeling of ploughing through so much for so little. The feeling that the essentials were in place and that the fine points could be haggled over indefinitely. To this degree then a certain injustice and lack of gratitude, a certain unawareness of how I was constituted by what I thought I or others could contain in a nutshell.

So although I was primed with philosophy in the rough sense of the word, I first posed myself as a candidate for studies in poetry, literature, and life. The study of philosophy was deferred according to no plan I was aware of at the time and can only make out now as a more pressing concern for some

outside or extra-philosophical enlightenment. Such being the case, it is as if I had already passed a judgement on philosophy without spending much time with it, without thinking that spending a lot of time with it could possibly affect this judgement. Already then I was antagonistic to it – perhaps even contemptuous of it – even while being on the road to it.

Now it could very well be that the enlightenment I was searching for was of a mythological or mystical sort and so contradictory to where I stood otherwise. Perhaps I wasn't so far off from where many or most are in this regard such that, if I take this supposition seriously, the most far-reaching difference between truth-tellers may be said to depend on whether one considers it part of one's task to recognize and articulate this contradiction or not. Not to do so would be of course to suppress it or affirm that all or at least the bulk of truth-telling is to be found in its modern-day secular or scientific form. In the case of the Christian religion and its entrance into this tradition when the latter was more receptive to resolving than dissolving problems, to contemplating origins and ends and the order of things on an equal footing rather than submerging the former in the latter, there was a systematic attempt to reconcile the two modes. But since the advent of modern philosophy the mythological or mystical mode has been driven underground where it generally resonates with more religiosity than can be admitted.

It is a fact that I couldn't articulate the contradiction then and could only in some sense live it. All I was conscious of at the time was that the suppression of it was repugnant to me. Repugnant to me and to others like me but not to all others, not to the many who suppress even the idea of any grievous suppression. For them, conditioned as they are to minute doses of suppression in everyday life, to considering this practise neither vile nor worthy of serious attention, truth-telling in its most formal aspect is the Elysium fields of saying how things are, a place where one can forget what one said about this or that in some former life. To be a hero in these fields is no small part of such a truth-teller's identity and so for him to be confronted with its mythical aspect is a matter of grievous error and affront. Two griefs then eternally tossed back and forth that largely have to do with whether one puts the accent on openness or order.

The advantage of openness is mine and the disadvantage of course is disorder. Perhaps openness has never been carried so far in truth-telling and the risk of disorder been allowed to grow so great. It is both an artistic pleasure and agony to push the one as far as I can and constrain and control the other. Every small step that seems to me a step forward only comes

when I have the feeling that these two objectives have been met. How painstaking my progress then and how many false steps I must take in order to arrive at the one true step! It is as if the telling I'm involved in must take in *all* my sensibilities and if the slightest one, be it intellectual, imaginative, or emotional, is overlooked or shortchanged, then it resounds in my ear like a false note. But not one that comes across as if I had committed an indubitable error on the world scene but only an error in what I'm attempting to do, namely, to tell the truth to myself. Thus it seems to me that the further I go along the more I realize that my subject is nothing but this attempt. And if the latter includes telling a few lies to myself (perhaps I just told one), well, at least I'm making every effort to note them and will continue to do so.

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