

15. Erudition and Earthy Experience

Apart from giving myself poor reviews as a playwright and favourable mention as a poet, I should say something about the balancing act I did for so many years between erudition and earthy experience. Having a foot in both camps was never something I simply endured or did unconsciously but rather cultivated as a sort of long-term experiment. The high in the low and the low in the high was what I tried to sustain or take in or bring out as much as possible as observable phenomena. To be thoroughly grounded in both camps was a way to keep the field open: to keep as far as possible from a thoroughgoing prejudice that, be it of such a nature as to take sides with erudition (in which case I would have felt much more obliged than otherwise to uphold the order principle) or to take sides with earthiness (in which case I would have slandered this principle), would have skewed my findings as one who, though he hardly knew it at the time, had the subject of truth-telling in his sights.

When at the age of twenty-five and freshly back from Europe, I took up residence in a seedy, cockroach-infested apartment, I was not put out by this. For having become more attuned to the errancy in my life as veritable sign or prodigy, I knew I couldn't become overly attached to comfort, security, appearance, and the like. In this respect I was like my father who, although he had grown up in a very respectable home and had been, as I suspect, oriented towards professionalism and material success as well as getting married and raising a family in the suburbs, eventually turned his back on all this as much as he let everything else go.

I think this matter of living in substandard conditions provides a touchstone for understanding how I carried on as my father while distinguishing myself from him. From the beginning I chose my living conditions on the basis of economizing and granting to myself the greatest possible freedom. Neither playwrighting nor studying at the university brought me an income and yet there was nothing I wanted to do more than these. Furthermore, they were long-term projects with no guarantee of, in the case of playwrighting, leading to success and, in the case of university (for I went about it without a definite plan or goal) leading to professional status and rewards.

But apart from studying and playwrighting, I was committed to the great project almost unbeknownst to me. The one that was vague and indefinite but somehow took in these activities as well as much else. Deep down I sensed that this great project was something that had to be carried out with highest honour and integrity, with passion, with skill, with endurance and fortitude, with an openness and willingness to experiment beyond the ordinary. Any other future course or career played very dimly in my mind

and, if I don't miss my guess, herein lies the difference between what I envisioned for myself and what my sister and father did. For I'm quite sure they were very much like me in having some great project in mind but then fell under the sway of a more common vision. One that had them mixing their highest aims and aspirations with what is generally thought to be most natural, fulfilling, satisfying, and rewarding. That is, one that had them imagining their secret souls as being perfectly compatible with the marital, the domestic, and the professional.

But why shouldn't the first be reconcilable with the others? Why should their natural inclination to the hearth, to matters of the heart, to the attendance upon these in good and due form be considered a barrier to some striving for perfection? Isn't it the case that a long list could be drawn up of people who have achieved great things while maintaining a home and family? Or of people who have fulfilled themselves admirably while pursuing a professional career? Time and again I have thought of this and, with respect to my own case but also my sister's and father's, the difference seemed to be that these successful artists, scientists, thinkers, and the like knew very well what road they were on and, and as jugglers of a sort down this road, what balls they had to keep up in the air and why. It seemed to me then that a great project could be achieved in complicated and even over-complicated circumstances as long as the project itself was not an over-complicated affair. A project barely known, a project still *on its way to being known* would be, in such circumstances, over its head.

It was in a miasma of such thoughts, feelings, and memories that I instinctively directed myself towards a sort of material minimalism while maximizing what I took to be my spiritual or mental capabilities. No life pursuit appeared more important to me than this and no act more shameful or distressing than to give way through weakness and abandon it. While it was grandiose enough to allow me to think of myself as a sort of knight errant on a noble quest and even a sort of Prometheus having to put up with day-to-day torments, it was also down-to-earth enough to prevent me from being a sort of Don Quixote tilting at windmills. On the other hand, I was conscious of the overwhelming power and enveloping nature of the monster I was contending with as well as its innermost proximity.

I don't suppose I can leave out another obsession that had already been with me a long time, namely, maintaining a robust constitution. Years of manual labour as well as activities such as running, cycling, skating, and so on had bequeathed to me a certain strength, confidence, and sense of being able to handle myself in most situations. But to bring this up now is simply

to note that, given this preoccupation with physical strength and stamina, I was probably in a better position to rebuff the more materialistic ways of elevating one's status.

So it was that, after returning from Europe, I purposely did without a car, a nicely furnished apartment, and other amenities. I also did without a girlfriend yet this last was far from being a situation sought out and desired. When I look back at it now, I cannot help but think I was somewhat naive, even somewhat stupid in the matter of sexual relations. In other words, it still surprises me I didn't have it in mind more than I did that, by not acquiring the more recognized signs of having good prospects and a hold on the future, I had made it much more difficult for myself. But, then again, what didn't I aspire to in this area that wasn't ridiculously difficult to the point of being utterly vain and unrealistic?

Is it possible for me ever to know how much my thoughts, the seemingly non-sexual ones, the seemingly disinterested, objective, and non-egoistic ones, were spurred on by the stick of sexual frustration and lured on by the carrot of sexual fantasy? Or how much this dynamic infiltrated and took possession of the dreams and visions of my earliest childhood? Certainly it is strange to think how this process resembles a lifelong courting ritual, an elaborate flirting around and with a desired object of both earthly and mythical proportions. To say that I hungered for young female flesh is true but I also had the desire for it only as something forever enduring or replenishing itself and not as something that would eventually wrinkle, wither, or sag. Secondly, I wanted this flesh only on condition that it wouldn't shake or disturb me too much or, if it did move me cataclysmically, it would do so only towards a greater understanding of myself. Just as the first then barred me from enthroning in my imagination a sustained coupling, a lifelong union, so did the second. For to bring me closer to myself as a truth teller was not to play the sentimentalist or deceiver but rather to confront my animality *tout nu*.

*(The kind of critical remark that's so easy to imagine at this stage
and the kind of retort that, because I never have it on my lips,
I hasten to write down)*

A. Sir, say what you will about confronting your animality, there are many who'll think you're only justifying your immorality.

B. True, but the many who'll think that way are precisely those who don't openly confront their animality.

A. *Tut, tut, sir! That's an ad hominem argument.*

B. *Precisely.*

Be that I was of less than immaculate bearing, be that I was a sort of moral hybrid, a repressed voluptuary or a restrained sensualist, the upshot of my diverse drives was that, while having a trainer's eye for a good regime, I had a gourmet's or voluptuary's eye for varied experiences. Of course this sort of thing had characterized my earlier years but, after returning from Europe, it was a much more refined and conscious part of my day-to-day. It spanned both sitting in a classroom and sitting in a theatre as well as much else that could be spanned by these in a figurative sense. Being refined enough to let me know how unrefined I was in this or that circumstance, it was also such as to let me bob up and down in these circumstances without excessive agitation. I was never so chagrined as to lose my essential enthusiasm nor so cocksure as to close off all internal debate and questioning. Even the sense that I was sailing into an area of personal weakness didn't always make me change course even if it often made me flinch and in fact quite often produced the opposite effect. The one of rallying me to do my best even when I knew my best was less than a shining affair.

What kind of rapport can there be between erudition and earthiness other than the one between order and errancy? To value the first is to value knowledge of the whole of something including knowledge *of the whole*. But by itself, strictly by itself, order or erudition is always mechanical and on the way to becoming moribund. But of course it is never strictly by itself and so it only has this tendency.

This tendency that is nonetheless very old and very tendentious and, with the long-held faith in God or reason or the two together grounding it and running along its whole base and taking it from broad base to highest peak, a veritable mountain exposing itself to the blasts of the four winds. As such, it gives the appearance of being old and young at the same time: unmoveable, unshakeable, unchangeable. A thing born anew every day. A towering backdrop casting long shadows over more ephemeral things.

Mechanical, mountainous, moribund, tendentious: these are no doubt incongruous elements that mix together magnificence and meanness with a flat efficiency that can run either way. Yet such mental and emotional traffic, such a confused bustling of thoughts and feelings, is what we have from the cradle to the grave and it would be hard to dignify it were it not for something else that infiltrates it and makes it act like a spur on us. That

makes it already the question, the thing to be questioned, the way of demanding something better from and for ourselves as well as from it. Something like the transformation or transfiguration of it or something like a true sign that the best of all possible worlds has already manifested itself in one way or another and that its proximity to us is real and perhaps only a few steps away.

Well, of course I have in mind here the greatest reach of all things, all human striving and not simply my own. Not simply my own poor way that may very well be a spoke in the wheel of others. But to confess this is not much more than to note that, given what a great wheel the world or, for that matter, an institution is, I tend to be more of an irritating straw, if anything at all, than an obstructing spoke. And so, as a consequence, more protective of my own personal freedom (not to mention survival) than tender in my conscience with respect to any threat I might pose to that greater freedom. More protective than of a paradoxically greater freedom than the greater freedom just mentioned insofar as the former, qualitatively speaking, outranks the latter.

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