

16. The Scholarly Climb

From the very first I looked upon the university as a kind of mountain to be climbed and as a kind of spiritual temptation or tendency to be resisted. Years of treating the world itself as a sort of university had made me both covetous of what it had to offer as well as suspicious of its operation. Principally I had my eye on the fault line that runs along all thought evaluated and credited such that it may be influenced by outside interests. Of course the university holds up an ideal of thought opposed to this and, like the average promise maker, holds good in the main. On the other hand, it is also very much like him when it comes to transgressions of the more minor sort.

I couldn't be tolerant of the university's lapses as I could of the average promise maker's because, in the case of the former, a formal position was taken up with respect to truth-telling. The university was the institution that declared itself to be interested in virtually no other operation or, if it did offer benefits and services of another sort, hailed these unquestionably valued attributes as being dependent on and subordinate to its one great operation. In a rough sort of way this was true but, on account of this very roughness, I found it to be unsatisfactory. I sensed a danger in being so caught up in the university's ways and means, so caught up in its mentality, that its loose integrity – loose from where I was sitting – would have been correspondingly taken up.

Such was the situation for me in the beginning and such would it be for me for many years to come. So little of the social crusader was there in it and yet so much of the spiritual that I longed for nothing more than internal change and growth as befit understanding this situation. Putting myself in the belly of the whale, so to speak, was an experiment to see if it would regurgitate me or if I would have to escape it like Odysseus from the cave of the Cyclops. Or, if on the contrary, I would be able to succeed with a certain amount of wiliness in making some part of it my chosen domicile.

Well, it was clear I was in no hurry, careful in my own way, and yet careless in the way of the world for not being more pressed and less fastidious. The importance that the average bourgeois attaches to keeping their house clean or at least to that part most on display was what I attached to my studies. Indeed, it unquestionably belonged to that part of my life where I was most hygienic and proper, most scrupulous not to let anything slip that I judged to be false or second-rate. Only on one occasion do I recall doing something a bit out of keeping with this, a bit contrary to what I had always attempted to do. It was an exercise in a course that I took directly after the one called *Twentieth Century Poetry and Poetics*. I ended up doing very well in it but,

with respect to the exercise in question, I wrote a short piece on a subject I didn't know very well and didn't feel very deeply. As a piece of creative writing, it failed and the good professor let me know.

But what am I to make of the fact that the only short story I ever wrote in my life came out of the same course and that, furthermore, its nature, although not strictly autobiographical, was close to it? And that this same short story, although a very modest thing, was more successful than any play I wrote in the following years?*

Why did I spend thirteen years writing plays that didn't succeed after writing a short story that did? Why did I write this story in the autobiographical mode and then not follow up with similar ones? Why continue to belabour these points if not to keep roughly to the task at hand while giving me one more opportunity to posit a greater project stretching throughout my life and subterraneously at work? One of extended errancy, diversity, and self-examination that, by being able to be posited over and over again, allows me to think I wasn't a complete fool during those years.

One thing is certain: that university studies attracted me and, like my European trip at its best, gave me no small satisfaction. I was lucky enough to find, as well as judicious enough to set up, conditions that were nearly perfect for me. Part-time studies, small classes, courses carefully chosen (as well as rejected), no sense of haste – these were some of the factors that made my first years at university so enjoyable. Never was I one who had to complain about being bored by a course or, with a few minor exceptions, some aspect of it. As much as I should give credit to the university for this, so I should give credit to the commitment I had made even before I entered it. In effect, I had vowed to myself that my studies there would proceed with pleasure and passion or not at all.

Even to this day I find this zero tolerance for boredom in education striking. Apart from never having met anyone in university who held to it to the same degree I did, it sums up how much I strove to have the alignment of head and heart as perfect as possible. In truth, it was an ideal I kept on realizing in much the same way that a respectable, law-abiding citizen does his. That is, it was so infused with the image I had of myself that any abuse of it would have seemed an outrage that required immediate remedy or retaliation.

Yet though I had some difficulties along this path, they never took a critical turn. At least this was the case all the long years I was a part-time student

at the University of Winnipeg and then, for a couple of years later, a full-time one. This period of my life therefore invites, contrary to a later period, a story not of high drama but rather one of simply crossing swords from time to time with the powers that be.

If I were to carry on from this point with a section that had the look of wanting to be entitled *My Struggles*, I would risk not only a presumption that goes without being punctured by criticism but also a simplification of matters that, so far as I can see, I have managed to avoid up to now. And yet however complicated things are, it can't be said that one shouldn't try to express them as simply as possible. This involves a constant negotiation that I never feel done with. In the case at hand, it is a matter of keeping in mind the close proximity between what one detests in scholarship and what one is indebted to. Between being repulsed, discomforted, and even unhinged at times and having the motivation, inclination, and handful of reasons to think long and hard about a subject.

But detesting something is, on the one hand, a much more immediate state of affairs and feeling one's indebtedness, particularly towards the thing detested, is, on the other hand, a much more deferred and drawn-out one. Once-bitter enemies often become old friends who look upon their former differences no longer as a war-like struggle but rather as one that, fought against some third party, was unfortunately marred and misunderstood by differing strategies. It takes time for such a situation to develop though. It takes time for various war-like attitudes and postures to break down because, once one takes up a position, it is very difficult to do other than defend it. To reinforce it over and over again and attack those who would dare to attack it. At least it is difficult if not impossible to make other moves than these at bottom for, as it must be admitted, there is a ceremony of innocence that goes along with them. A strong and no doubt necessary tendency on the part of thinkers to obscure or subordinate them by stressing a collective objective called truth.

All of this I'm concerned to map out as best I can along with what runs cross-current to it, namely, the war of words that never ceases but only undergoes various permutations. Speaking close to home where I speak best, I should say that *On Truthtelling* could be viewed as an act of war despite all the talk about being indebted to the enemy and, as it might seem, wanting to be reconciled with him. For the enemy, more often than not, sees the olive branch being held out to him as a gesture merely disguising another one of less amiable and altruistic bent. True enough, there is seldom an open avowal of this since a large number of truth-tellers

pay homage to an etiquette barring a *procès d'intention*. A whole area of truth-telling, understood of course in the expanded sense, is thereby blocked off and, along with it, whatever inclination there may be to declare that the above-mentioned olive branch is in effect a laurel wreath with which one or another opponent of good will wishes to crown himself.

All right, let it be admitted that there is this resistance of sorts that has followed a long and winding path and finally culminated in this long and winding, not to mention windy, report on it. Virtually everything that pertains to this largely defensive strategy points to preserving an integrity of sorts that is assailed on all sides and neither wholly right nor wholly wrong in itself. All that is wholly right is that things of this nature should have their exceptional moment, should have what keeps their value high and even what allows them to keep any value at all. If I had never believed myself to be one of these moments, it is not likely I could have propelled myself this far. How I have managed to do so has of course already been a good part of my task and, if I don't miss my guess, I will have to continue to bear down on this task even more than previously. One thing is certain: it is as heterogeneous as can be and only homogeneous to the extent that it focuses on a major preoccupation.

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*** My Youthful Social Conformity and Its Tragic Consequences**

When I was very young and very innocent, ignorant of myself and the world, vulnerable to unruly circumstance, and desperately in need of stability and certainty in life, older and wiser minds set down the rules and guidelines which I, for the most part, adhered to – if not entirely without resistance, then without questioning their validity. From the earliest age my parents instructed me, often with praise or admonishment, to be honest with everybody, including myself, to be respectful of other people, and not to trespass on the rights of others. From my teachers I learned to recognize and obey those in authority, to assume good behaviour, and to value hard work. All of this was meant to lay the groundwork for my development as a person and to help me find my rightful place in society.

When I was somewhat older, less of an innocent, and more cognizant of myself and my surroundings, the pressure to conform took a radically different turn. My parents and teachers no longer held complete sway over me; they still had their influence but now there came to the fore an outside will which wielded no visible authority yet was stronger than they were. It did not have to shout or scold me into submission but commanded without articulation and came from no one direct source. Its voice was the lure of social acceptance and its command was to alter one's self, if necessary, to achieve it.

In my early adolescent years I had a problem of not being able to win acceptance from my classmates because of an inherently shy and introverted nature. I used to spend most of my time reading and doing homework. Rarely was I a part of a crowd of laughing, jostling girls and boys. How I longed for the shared intimacy I saw among them! How I anguished over the shortcomings I saw in myself which impeded me from becoming as they were! Gradually I devoted less time to studies, books, and personal daydreams, and became a hanger-on with one group of classmates. I learned to talk as they talked and act as they acted. As they scorned books and studies, so did I. As they saw amusement in everything, so did I. Their ideas became my ideas, and their values became my values. The teacher was an enemy; the school was a prison. Parents were a nuisance, worse, a confounded annoyance intruding upon your privacy and interfering with your fun and freedom. Having friends over to your house and playing records was really the thing to do and everything else mattered about as much as an obscure date in a history text.

When my interest turned sharply towards the opposite sex, it was even more important that I be "in". Two from my group of male friends began carrying on coy conversations with a couple of the prettiest girls in class. This soon progressed to open flirtation and before long the four of them were announcing that they were going steady. The rest of us in the group, not having girlfriends, enviously regarded our former peers who were now a peg above us, and we sought to emulate them. We hung around our successful friends as much as we could, badgering them with anxious questions about sex and romance, identifying our needs with their needs, our desires with their desires, our selves with their selves. Their girlfriends were quickly incorporated into our group and, as was natural, they brought a few of their female friends along with them. Even so, one and a half years of heartache and feeling dreadfully abnormal went by before I had the desired feature of a girl walking by my side in the school hallway.

My male friends now talked in a certain way about girls which I felt compelled to imitate. Its vocabulary included such terms and expressions as 'scoring', 'easy lay', 'how many times?', and 'was she good?' Never having done more than neck with my girl didn't prevent me from, as can be imagined, holding my own end up in these conversations.

When I left junior high for high school, there occurred a big shakeup of friends and groups

of friends. I retained no ties with anybody I had known in junior high. I belonged now to a group of sometime students who were basically a rude, coarse lot. Drinking beer, driving fast cars, fighting, going to weekend bashes, and making as many girls as possible were our main activities and what practically all our free-time thoughts centred on.

Although I did not fit in well with this group, I struggled to assume their attitudes of mind, habits of living, and priorities in life. I grew rough and surly with whoever was outside our group and whom I took a casual dislike to. I treated girls only as I thought they should be treated in order to win favours from them. I was forever skipping classes and, in those I did attend, I was inattentive and given to being smart with the teachers.

Thus it should have come as no surprise to me when I learned that I had failed my final year. Yet it did. The distressing thought of having to repeat a year served me well in one way. I began to rethink the course my life had taken, to weigh the consequences it was having for me, and to question the results I was looking for.

Everything that I had been earliest taught was contradicted and undermined by my efforts to win social acceptance. These efforts had retarded my growth as a person and diminished my chances of being successful in later years. Instead of trying to develop myself as a unique and independent person, I had hastened to identify myself with those around me whom I thought better off than I. I had changed my true thoughts and feelings, interests, and values that they might conform to those of the group. I had suffered a loss in myself of myself that no circle of friends, no association with others, and no family member or loved one could ever restore to me.