

18. Harking Back to the Heroic

Getting back to my university studies, I'm ready to enter into the fray of what others think and do. Already I can foresee many diverse soundings in a vast area but not nearly so vast as it could be.¹ And already I can foresee the inconclusive results of these soundings as they result from, while trying to tell the truth about truth-telling, trying to tell the truth about myself. I can foresee the *heterogeneity* of all this as it comes more in the artistic mastery of the scholarly than the scholarly mastery of my subject.²

Blessed be the professor of the course I took called *Ancient Epic and Drama*. He was a middle-aged man with a humped back, a turtle-like neck and head, and an enthusiasm for ancient Greece and Rome that made one quickly forget his deformity. Always in high spirits and with boundless energy and enthusiasm, he romped through Homer, Virgil, and Ovid as well as the tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. He did so while bringing up a range of architectural, historical, biographical, geographic, touristic, and other points of interest. And he also did so in a range of tones that could go from the quite gay to the quite serious. Sometimes his voice would fall to a hush that signalled his awe and reverence for some aspect of high culture either in antiquity in general or in ancient Greece in particular. Indeed, if I had known only professors who approached their subjects with the fervour and intensity he did, it is not likely I would have been able to make a career out of getting my back up at Academia.³

Failing this purity of intention, the university was forever less a potential home for me than a path to negotiate. An arduous climb in which its inherent and even monumental superiority in the way of erudition intimidated me less than any thought I might abandon it as *my* way. Failing this purity of intention, the university couldn't have been a home to me without me no longer being at home with myself. The idealistic and egoistic were bound up in this space of wanting to be different that was forever a hair's breath away from, on the one hand, a smug sense of superiority and, on the other, a feeling of ineptitude and deficiency.

Dr. Gold was in a class by himself and yet I never had the slightest wish to be like him. For purity of intention, insofar as there is such a thing or, more properly, insofar as I'm constrained to use this expression, was what I myself enjoyed as a student as well as an additional something that pertains to specialization or rather the lack of it or rather the lack I perceived as springing from it.

If so early I could mark the distance between my own interests and the interests of what I considered to be the ideal university professor, it was

most certainly with the awareness that no one scholarly area, however full and rich in itself, could be my permanent home. The idea of filling up the foreground with an increasingly more detailed study of one subject while consigning to the background so much else was abhorrent to me. To be sure, it was a fine thing to be able to read Greek and Latin as well as to teach them as Dr Gold did, but I certainly didn't think it more important than, for example, reading the works of a renowned literary theorist by the name of Northrop Frye. Such was what I was doing at the time and it comes to mind now for two reasons. First because it allowed me to take in a highly sophisticated survey of all Western literature that not only embraced the Greco-Roman but the Judeo-Christian tradition. Secondly because, having mentioned Northrop Frye to Dr. Gold on one occasion, I was surprised to find out he knew virtually nothing about him.

But if I were to hold that specialization was anathema to me, I would risk overlooking a persistent motif that kept cropping up in my work and harks back to my preoccupation with the heroic. It would be quite a task to go through all the essays I wrote and pick out this motif. Whatever significance there is in this, and it seems that it is still a thing to be worked out, strikes me as occurring on two levels. First, that I was willing to look at the heroic from many different angles. Secondly, that this value, virtue, or way of living normally doesn't get much play in Academia.

Suppose that I felt that, in light of the seeming devaluation of the heroic in the bourgeois world that the university itself represents, my self-image was to some extent compromised or called into question. Suppose that this state of affairs was operating on a level I was barely conscious of and involved trying to negotiate my way in or through this world. If such were the case, it must certainly have brought to my studies a personal stake or investment that, given my lack of the usual long-term objectives, would have been in some sense beneficial. Not only didn't I have any job, vocation, or profession in sight, but I wasn't even concerned about obtaining a degree. Such high-performance sticking power as I had then must have come from some other source.

Truly I cannot think of any other way to give some precision to the spiritual side of my studies other than by putting forth this hypothesis. What others dreamed and imagined was not there for me, not pulling me along, not making me tailor my expectations and ambitions to what had the look of being most practical and success-oriented. The strongest image I had was of cutting my own path and examining all those matters that lay closest to my heart. But I didn't stop at any time to identify these matters precisely. I

simply fell upon them as they came along.

But I must ask myself now how such an identifying task might play itself out? Must it involve swelling myself up as a hero and to such a degree that little has significance apart from it? Is this playing of the hero even now symptomatic of a built-in bias to my subject? But, then again, is truth-telling ever without heroes and hero-worshipping of one kind or another? Could there have ever been a philosopher worth his salt, as Paul Ricoeur says in *La Métaphore vive*, who didn't imagine himself getting closer to the truth than all previous philosophers?

– It seems you're lacking a definition of the heroic? Is it grandstanding and calling attention to yourself? Is it crediting to yourself some truth-telling virtue that others don't have? Or is it, on the basis of a mere assumption, identifying it with some drive to fame and glory?

With respect to this matter, I have sensed a certain queasiness in myself right from the beginning. Being directly involved, I'm aware that I'm potentially subject to letting self-inflating and self-aggrandizing impulses get the upper hand. As much as I don't want this to happen, I keep reminding myself that the heroic is multiple, complex, and morally wide-ranging. Moreover, such a view of the heroic pretty well sums up my investigation of it as a long-term project more explicit and less all-encompassing than the one that, before it got signed up as *On Truth-telling*, could hardly identify itself. A project that nonetheless only got underway informally during my earliest university years and kept up a certain awareness or presence largely on the basis of topics I chose to write about.⁴

"Rocky: A Review"

"It's a movie that was made to appeal to anybody who has ever dreamed of becoming a somebody. The hero is introduced to us as a second or third-rate boxer who has his best fighting years behind him. Moreover, his career is adversely affected by his lifestyle that, to put it mildly, is one of less than Spartan training and discipline. He is free about drinking wine and beer with the local boys, he allows himself a cigarette from time to time, and he trains only when he's not at his bread-and-butter job of collecting loans for a loan shark. By sheer luck and due to no special merit of his own, he gets a crack at fighting with the world heavyweight champion in a specially arranged bout. It is characteristic of Hollywood fantasy that not only does he put up a good fight against the champion, but nearly succeeds in scoring an upset victory. As it stands, he enjoys a tremendous personal triumph by lasting the

full fifteen rounds, something no previous challenger has done. He thereby proves to be the fighter that no one, including himself, had ever believed possible.

“The story appears to be a rehashing of the American dream. Rocky comes to fight the world heavyweight champion not because he has the best record of all the local Philadelphia fighters from whose ranks he’s chosen. Rather, it’s because his ring-title, *the Italian Stallion*, sounds good for promotional purposes. Thus his rising to new heights is first and foremost a fluke, bearing little resemblance to the slow hard climb from the bottom to the top that is more characteristic of true-to-life success stories.

“What the film seeks to provide us with is the picture of a man transcending himself, reaching new and loftier heights through sheer effort, will, courage, and determination. Once Rocky decides that he will go against the heavyweight champion, he sets up a strict regimen. He gets up every morning at four o’clock, gulps down five raw eggs, and then runs through the still-dark city. At some point he stops off at a meatpacking plant and pummels a side of beef until his hands are raw and bloody. Later on during the day he works out at the gym, doing difficult one-armed pushups, punching the speed bag, and sharpening his footwork. As the days and weeks of his training go by, we witness, to the accompaniment of rock music, that he is becoming markedly stronger and fitter. A startling transformation occurs during the two or three minutes of the film which are all that are needed to depict the five full weeks of Rocky’s intensive training. From the bumfighter that he formerly credited himself with being (an opinion that most of his entourage shared), he turns into a serious contender for the heavyweight championship of the world.

“Rocky is not the only one to undergo an astonishingly rapid and dramatic growth. His girlfriend from the pet shop, after one night spent in his apartment, changes from an extremely shy insecure nervous woman to an affectionate sensual creature who has also gained a good measure of self-confidence. She is finally able to assert herself against her abusive foul-mouthed brother. Whatever the degree or depth of the personality problem she had before she met Rocky, it is effectively rooted out by the simple expedient of sleeping with him. She in effect becomes a new and stronger woman just as he becomes a vastly improved fighter. Since he is responsible for the change in both cases, he wins the admiration of the audience by two masterful if unlikely strokes.

“The pleasing, paradoxical, and sympathetic personality of Rocky is the

essential ingredient of the film. Without it, the simplistic way in which he achieves his successes as a fighter and lover, as well as the achievements themselves, would be of little interest or attraction. He is shown to be a kind and gentle man who just happens, as it seems, to be a participant in a brutal sport and a leg-breaker on the side. He is merciful in his professions: he spares a man the breaking of his thumb when he comes to collect from him; he forgives an old trainer the ten years of disinterest in his career. He is also a friend of the neighbourhood: he accepts a slug of wine from a group of hippies on a street corner; he picks up a drunk collapsed outside a bar; he plays the role of a guidance counsellor for a teenage girl who hangs out with a bad crowd. He is also a lover of animals: he talks to his pet turtles and to the budgies in the pet shop; he does some of his roadwork with a dog on a leash. When he courts the girl from the pet shop, he is tactful, charming, amusing, and considerate in a crude but charming way. The first gentle kiss he wins from her lips is in sharp contrast to the fight scenes with their body blows and bloody jabs to the head.

“Rocky is the kind of hero the average person can easily identify with. He starts off as a fairly common type, a normal joe who, along with his situation, has built-in limitations. He’s an ignorant, uneducated, and aging fighter who seemingly has only the prospect of going even further downhill before him. Despite all this, his casual self-acceptance, his sense of humour, his frank and unassuming manner prevent him from looking like a sad case. His faults endear him to us as much as his good points. When he finally takes on heroic stature, we are behind him and thrill to his success. The vicarious enjoyment we receive from watching Rocky unexpectedly knock down his superior opponent and thereby come close to winning the world heavyweight championship is the voice of the underdog in all of us crying out for recognition.”

With respect to the hero of such a movie, why do people accept the unlikely and even preposterous if not to let admiration flow without reserve? If not to let a striking image or event take on the aspect of greatest significance? What was there in me that didn’t object to falsehood, that could at least give it a reprieve from critical censure while I was being swept up by various emotions? Is there any way to answer these questions apart from admitting that truth is rivalled by other values and that, furthermore, its own particular value is relative to circumstances that neither do away with it nor send it aloft entirely free and independent?

Yet truth can’t be what it is other than by at least *seeming* to be free and independent. Even though, strictly speaking, it never is nor ever will be this

pure independence, it must be the movement that sustains this image as idea. Hence even its identification with the divine sphere eventually had to be challenged. Set up as it was like a cross on a mountain (with all attendant forms, fetishes, and fakery), its loftiness as divine revelation was eventually taken to be, generally considered, less than the sure flight of reason. The corresponding exaltation of the latter was one with identifying it with truth while at the same time allowing it to be of such a nature as to overfly it as an always further exercise and inquiry while leaving behind its own true markings as an ever-enlarged text and better-known world. But then the identification of truth with this text and this world clapped on a restraint that, if reason were to keep flying high, meant that it had to circle back and feed and defecate even in its most hallowed precincts.

Surely truth-telling was carrying around the seeds of its own destruction when telling the truth about truth itself had to become a task. At the same time the very fact that other values have always been secretly at work in truth-telling has preserved and continues to preserve it in much the way that numerous interests preserve an immense industry. Its self-destructive role as such has always been and continues to be played out on the margins.

Being myself what might be called a self-destructive moment of truth-telling and, at the same time, one inexorably caught up in its industry, I represent, as it seems, something sacrificial, something tragic, something that exalts truth-telling by virtue of its seeming willingness not simply to be part of its industry but also an ideal so thoroughly elevated as to risk itself. Herein would be an explanation as to why the heroic has always exerted such a hold on me or at least why I haven't been able to approach truth-telling without having it as a frame of reference.

Of course it is far from the case that the heroic always keeps company with the tragic and this is no less true in truth-telling than in other spheres. In order to speak fairly about the matter, it should be admitted that the heroic can be found wherever there is singular courage, devotion to duty, accomplishment, endurance, and so on. Therefore any analysis of it shouldn't rob others of what is their due but neither should it fall short in crediting to the heroic as *tragically* heroic its specifically excessive, overreaching, risk-taking, and therefore super-charged valorization of value and meaning. Herein lies an area where moral judgement can range from commendation of the most exalted sort to condemnation of greatest sorrow, anguish, and upset.

When I took up *The Iliad* in Dr. Gold's class, the preposterous as I name it

now and as it no doubt pertains to a knowledge of contemporary things and a twentieth century perspective – the preposterous had such a look of grandeur about it that my attitude towards it was less critical than curious. In a longish essay entitled “Homer’s Treatment of War in *The Iliad*,” I noted that the Trojan War was depicted as being, apart from the participation of a handful of Olympian gods such as Zeus, Hera, Athene, Ares, and Apollo, mainly a series of battles between a handful of warrior leaders with superhuman strength and prowess such as Achilles, Hector, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Menelaus, Aeneas, Sarpedon, Patroclus, and Diomedes. Of course what was submerged in such a depiction of war, in such a depiction no less aesthetic than ethical, was the vast number of common soldiers who lost all individuality and personal value and, as a sort of headless and faceless mass, formed nothing more than a majestic backdrop for the heroes.

“When the common soldiers are mentioned, it is to describe the spectacle of warfare. The forces unleashed by war are compared, for example, to those in nature: the two armies meet like mountain streams in a ravine, the Greeks sweep into battle like great waves on a beach, and the Myrmidons pour from their ships like cold flakes before a northerly gale. This imagery conveys nature’s beauty and grandeur onto the battlefield.”

Why was I not critical of this lack of veracity in the depiction of war, in this patent omission of its immense confusion and messiness, of its wide-scale horror and ugliness, if it were not that I thought that it was the only way to get at truth from another angle? That is, truth more revelatory than propositional or empirical, more caught up at the heart of human desire and imagination. More caught up then where these two most display their great motivating range and power and so before they encounter other factors that decidedly complicate them?

But then again the question is: Why are the heroes of *The Iliad* mainly tragic and what is it that proceeds from them that didn’t proceed from the sort of superheroes that captured my imagination as a child? If it doesn’t have something to do with mortality, with the fact that we are all conscious of it, with the fact that this consciousness is, generally speaking, a painful thing, then the interest in and concern for the heroes of *The Iliad* – an interest and concern that I daresay exceeds what we give to the gods – remains inexplicable. To identify with Zeus or some other god only goes so far: it carries us out of this world towards the possibility of another. To identify with a Greek or Trojan hero, on the other hand, however implausible his stature and circumstances, is to rest within a world similar enough to our own to give to a glorified life or career a sort of practical grounding.

A sort of practical grounding, indeed, and yet this is far from saying that it has all rationality and good sense on its side. It is only to say that a certain portion of rationality and good sense is necessary to credit a course or career with meaning. I think I stumbled across this point in my essay without quite recognizing it. Certainly I noted that, on the one hand, the heroes were very mindful of their personal reasons for being on the battlefield. That is, their reasons not with reference to anything complicated but simply to values that they had inculcated and that pertained to their specific role in society.

Why do the Lycians at home distinguish you and me with marks of honour, the best seats at the banquet, the first cut off the joint, and never-empty cups? . . . Does not all this oblige us now to take our places in the Lycian van and fling ourselves into the flames of battle?

On the other hand, I noted that the reasons for the war itself and, more particularly, for prolonging it and not getting it resolved by peaceful means were so weak as to slide the whole venture into absurdity.

“Why the Trojans go on with the war and risk eventual defeat and destruction by not giving into the demand that Helen be returned to her lawful husband is hard to understand. It certainly could not be out of any deep love or respect for her or, for that matter, the man who stole her away from her husband. Although Priam and Hector have always treated Helen properly, the rest of her family have abused her and, as for the townspeople, well, it is clear they would like to see the last of her. Most Trojans even have a lower opinion of Paris than they do of Helen. The soldiers who are fighting largely on behalf of his interests ‘loathe him, all of them, like the death.’ Hector chides him for being a vain, self-centred coward. Even Helen scorns him. On top of all this, the Trojans certainly are not fighting the Greeks because Helen prefers to stay with them. Time and again she wishes that she had never left her native city and come to Troy with Paris. Given all these considerations, the wisest policy would be to relinquish her. Yet when an assembly is held at Priam’s palace and a proposal is made to this effect, a single objection by Paris is enough to quash it.”

It is this both having and not having good reasons for great effort, for in fact upholding a cause for which one is willing to die, that now strikes me as not being merely accidental but central to the tragically heroic. In essence it involves a special commitment of sorts that ties the heroic to the human and, indeed, the all too human while allowing it to be in some sense

superhuman.

"*The Iliad* is rife with illustrations of the difference between how the Olympian gods and how their human counterparts look upon war. For the first it is largely a piece of theatre, a monumental sport or spectacle in which they can intervene at will. Being indestructible, they are just as much magnificent dilettantes – meddlers, idlers, boasters, and gamesters in their war-fevered antics – as participants. By turns they take on the aspect of amused onlookers and quarrelsome backers, of frivolous actors and headstrong players while moving about on a stage that, stretching between heaven and earth, surpasses the one that the heroes rush about on. Built-in limitations and, more particularly, ever-present danger and death are then what gives seriousness to the game."

– Is there any reason why one shouldn't assume that a person could make a great, indeed, a heroic effort on the basis of good reasons rather than bad ones? And, furthermore, doesn't such a person represent the human condition better than the other sort?

Whoever purports to have or seems to have no bad reason for doing what he is doing is not so much a person who presents himself fully as one who presents himself as the *image* of a full person. An idealized image, to be sure, and one that can accommodate the heroic as much as dispense with it. Keeping up this idealized image is virtually indistinguishable from keeping up the ideal. Specifically, the one of being able to reach right down to the foundations of being and draw the line between good and evil even at these lowest depths.

The tragically heroic is what makes so much else in human affairs look like dilettantism. Unlike the spirit that moves and resides amongst the usual round of platitudinous proclamations exalting this or that, it is not something that gives way the moment danger and death move towards it. It is precisely at this moment of willing to risk all and pay the highest price that some principle, practise, or program, be it new-born or age-old, gets the fullest spiritual endorsement. From this point of view, the tragically heroic is entirely open to a multitude of possibilities that take it from the best to the worst. At the same time it is hard to imagine anything in human affairs that, having value attached to it, doesn't have this sort of commitment lurking behind it somewhere.

– Your point is not well-taken. Such things as love, friendship, wisdom, and so on have intrinsic value and require nothing in the way of sacrifice or

suffering to keep them intact and essentially what they are.

I suppose what I'm getting at is that great valuing is mixed up with great seriousness and that, just as the first takes in the act of valuing itself, so the second takes in suffering and death. Any standardized valuing or lesser seriousness must at least be potentially in touch with these and potentially able to manifest itself as tragically heroic. Otherwise it won't be able to resist a slide towards dilettantism or, more properly, stop this slide that is always underway and always threatening to swallow up the spiritually neglected and atrophied.

This business of the tragically heroic as highest spiritual endorsement was a preoccupation of mine in a second essay I wrote for Dr. Gold. At the time I had no clear thought of the tragically heroic as a specifically valorizing or vitalizing principle and so my study of it, although ambitious, was limited and self-contained. As usual, I sought to convey the full measure of what I was up to in my title. For this reason it shouldn't hurt to blazon it forth now even though this essay remains to this day unpublished and simply part of my private papers.

**The Nature of Noble Suffering and the Noble Nature Suffering:
A Comparative Study of Shakespeare's
Lear and Sophocles' Oedipus**

When the intellectual, emotional, and imaginative meet with a kind of high-level intensity that throws none of them in the shade, something is sounded that cries out meaning and value for this world and being human in it. Perhaps it is only now I can measure this against what is always in some sense threatening our estate and what I would be less inclined to call nothingness than infinite change. To the latter would belong what surpasses the human even in terms of all human value and meaning: the unimaginable state of what is not for us but for the always-coming-to-be. But for us of course this is equivalent to nothingness or has always been interpreted as such and, as a consequence, we have lodged in its place a god or gods as ultimate security. The plan or picture is almost perfect save for the fact that the divine sphere never quite loses its illusory, deceptive, or arbitrary look. A compensatory movement is then in some sense called for from the human sphere. Here there is only one currency that can be used to purchase value and meaning if these two are to be reckoned priceless.

But what I might note now is that there is something inhuman in all this that ironically works on behalf of the human. That puts art and life on a par when

suffering and death are not so close as to cause us more pain than pleasure, more horror than fascination, and more misery than exhilaration. Both the historical account and dramatic portrayal of suffering and death don't normally overwhelm our sensibilities: fear and pity, though they may very well be raised, are also anaesthetized. It could even be said that a certain celebration and joyousness attach themselves to suffering and death insofar as these make possible the highest affirmation.

But when I wrote the essay on Lear and Oedipus, I was still enough of an Aristotelian to think the world a timeless and ineffaceable script and the law of contradiction one of its fundamental traits. I consequently spoke about spiritual nobility as if I knew what it was in itself and so without realizing to what degree I spoke about it *for myself*. No doubt this explains why I was so discomfitted and at a loss for words when Dr. Gold, after lauding my essay, asked: "Yes, but after all, what is spiritual nobility?" A few brief comments he put down on my paper suggest that, for him, it lay on the side of resignation and obedience.

"A very good essay. You have thought the subject through. . . . Perhaps what [Oedipus] accepts is the complete control of the gods. He has learned submission just as Lear has been forced to adopt humility. Each has been forced to submit – Lear to the realities of his position and folly (without responsibility there is no power) and Oedipus to divine omnipotence."

Everything that was important to me about Lear and Oedipus – still is important to me – was obviously not taken to heart by Dr. Gold. Not any more than I took to heart what was studied in a later course and, along with being a certain put down of the tragically heroic, close to the heart of a thinker I would nonetheless call a kindred spirit. Just as I was sympathetic to but not swept up by Kierkegaard's account of faith (which goes hand in hand with his vaunting the knight of faith over the tragic hero), so no doubt was Dr. Gold to what I had to say.

But this *for myself*, as I realize now, is only highly limited in one sense, in the most private or personal sense, whereas in a much more extended sense, in the sense of its being indefinitely repeatable, it is highest affirmation. But as this highest affirmation, as this spiritual endorsement with virtually no intellectual, emotional, and imaginative remainder, it is not the pedantic or pedestrian that is being repeated but the exceptional or extraordinary moment. Not the thing itself, be it a virtue, duty, or principle, but its exceptional proximity to or equation with suffering and death.

I examined both Lear and Oedipus with particular attention to their various attributes and how, both in their striving and suffering of greatest moment, certain of these attributes seemed to come to the fore as being preeminently important to them, preeminently in need of being held to and not abandoned. Therefore it was not a renouncing but a maintaining of something in them that, as an act of will, spoke loudest to me. That declared that Oedipus would not be Oedipus if he had followed the usual advice to avoid danger. Or that Lear would not be Lear if he had followed the usual counsel to be patient and show forbearance. More sensible perhaps would they have been but also smaller. Men who carried around a number of half-prized virtues but not one that was fully prized. Or men who paid lip service to finding out the truth of a matter but backed down when it threatened them. Or, then again, men who, suffering both public and private humiliation, threw away the last shreds of their dignity in order to cling to the comfort of hearth and home.

Seeing the tragically heroic in Lear and Oedipus as an *in itself* blinded me to the fact that the tragically heroic can change, can in fact be many things, and that, with respect to either one of the above characters or their corresponding tragedies, there is always the possibility, indeed likelihood, that they will be staked out and supervised by other forms of the tragically heroic. Certainly one of the most central of these is the god-man who lays down his life for values that, on the ethical if not eschatological plane, have gained a kind of universal acceptance. But of course it doesn't end there and anyone who takes up the torch and is willing to go to the wall for what they believe in both demonstrates and delivers something that no possible argument can.

Looking back over this essay, I can't help but observe that I myself was anxious to play on at least one Christian motif. That is, a certain selflessness that both Lear and Oedipus show at the height of their agony and that, as captured in my imagination at the time, can perhaps be illustrated by saying that just as Christ looked past his own suffering to concern himself with the fate of others when he uttered his famous plea from the cross and begged forgiveness for his persecutors, so both Lear and Oedipus look past their suffering to concern themselves with others.

"Where Lear and Oedipus most come together is at that point they transcend their suffering most marvellously – at the moment when thoughts full of love and sympathy for others arise out of spirits as vexed and as sorrowed and as weighed down as nature can inflict on man."

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1 What a sea of scholarship there is! So much to be seen and yet can never be seen! So much to plumb and yet can never be plumbed! So much to ride upon and yet, no matter how great the waves stirred up, can never be troubled and trafficked with except in some small part.

2 And here is the whole matter of not being able to speak to the point about it. Or, rather, only being able to speak to *one* point, namely, that truthtelling is complication and even over-complication. What is left then but a poverty of definition, explanation, and argumentation that can only be justified by pointing to the innumerable definitions, explanations, and arguments that constitute it?

3 For then the university and its professors would have been the embodiment of a certain purity of intention that I myself was striving for and that largely had, as its own impurity, a will to be in some sense superior.

4 Here is where I begin integrating essays of the past into the present one. By bringing in even more thematically related but heterogeneous elements, I risk a diffusion that borders on confusion and a self-exploration that borders on self-indulgence. By the same token, my ongoing task is one of admitting them not so confusedly or self-indulgently as would be the case if my subject were not the one it is.