

## *20. The Lure of the Non-Professional*

Putting ever more balls into the air doesn't go without some risk. I would like to think I'm a skilful enough juggler to be forgiven letting a ball or two get away. The subject of truth-telling is complicated and even over-complicated beyond my mere telling. Therefore it would be strange if the latter didn't show some signs of drifting. Digging into these old university papers, I realize I have to keep my eye on the eight ball. I have to keep digging into an intellectual development heterogeneous enough but guided by a small number of identifiable elements. It is not for me to say they always produced top-flight work but I can say they always produced a top-flight effort. Never in all my university days did I write an essay simply because it was an assignment. Every one of them was an intellectual challenge I was glad to take on.

But before going on with my university studies, what is there to be said about that side of me seemingly so devoted to a non-professional mode? What ethic or aesthetic was operating, what erotic element, what sometimes fearful or fluid combination of these made me want to sidle up to the academic world in my own way? Made me want to come into the proximity of the professional in my own stealthy roundabout way: the good, the solid, the secure, the well-run, the efficient, the knowledgeable, and so on. For it is precisely this ambivalence, this attraction-repulsion that comprised my state and, to the degree that I fixated upon it and carried it along as a sort of calling or career, set me apart from virtually all others.

But it was never so clear or clarion as to leave me with no moments of doubt. Moments in which I was discomforted and suspected that I was deceiving myself and aiming low rather than high. It is difficult to ignore the fact that most people with a will and a way move towards positions of authority and responsibility. As just one more person in the crowd, as just one more member of struggling humanity, I couldn't help but sometimes feel I was shirking my duty and not living up to my potential. Perhaps instances of these doubts and suspicions came to me when I erred from my customary path and imagined myself as one of the well-thinking majority. That goodly number of people who lead decent enough lives and who, if it weren't for that small grain of insincerity I always detected in them, would have surely been able to claim me as one of their own.

*We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!*

With respect to this insincerity that troubled me, I was as sensitive to it as the fairy tale princess who couldn't sleep on account of the pea under her twenty mattresses. It seemed to me that, throughout my life, I had never met anyone who, having identified his personal interests with the interests of some institution or organization, didn't start to equivocate or speak in a hollow way or at best remain silent the moment he felt these interests threatened. There was a systematicity about it that I instinctively felt was a threat to my own particular interests. It kept me at a distance from the professional world as if I thought it might catch hold of me. Towards it I put up all the resistance of a dissident living in an oppressive regime or a martyr to the faith amongst those who turn apostate. All this I can attest to while still admitting I had moments of doubt and uncertainty. Never was it simply a case of telling myself that I couldn't be coopted by the system but only that it hadn't occurred up to the moment of thinking about it.

The worry of being trapped in some false position was essentially the belief that the professional world was full of such traps. From politicians down (or, as some would say, from politicians up) there seemed to be this way of defending one's position or course of action that was necessarily closed off to self-criticism. Clearly there was this virtually universal preoccupation with projecting an image of confidence and authority that superceded any desire to go on record with one's faults and hesitations. Virtually every person in a public position was testimony to this. Criticism as mode of address was preponderantly – indeed, with few exceptions – outwardly directed. What passed for honesty under such conditions was how accurate one was in the criticism of the other and not the degree to which the intentional or motivational roots of it were exposed to the light of day.

Though I identified insincerity and lack of openness with the professional world, I still didn't have a clear conception of how necessary and indispensable they are to it. It was as if I thought that everyone who was a part of this world had made a decision more in accordance with their own natures than, as I believe now, in accordance with the both apparent and not-so-apparent forces that rule it. Of course it is not infrequently the case that what starts off as second-nature eventually enjoys all the appearance of the natural and is even worn with honour and distinction. Such no doubt was the illusion I had of the matter for a long time. I couldn't envisage all the various shades of struggle and resistance in people who, finally casting their vote for the ways of the world (which, to be thoroughly honest, also means taking on a different set of values that have their own ethical import), relegate all this turmoil to a past self too naive and idealistic for genuine work and accomplishment.

How much of a life may be settled on the basis of what is most comfortable on a day-to-day basis! Whereas I didn't take fright at the prospect of, even at the age of twenty-five, continuing on for several years as a manual labourer, another quite possibly would have thought it a terrible fate. Such a person would have wielded his shovel as if he were condemned to forced labour. Every moment doing such work would have seemed to him a wasted moment. Any news he happened to receive about his friends' progress in their careers would have tormented him. Unhappy would his days have been as he saw himself losing various opportunities to improve his lot in life.

Had I been one who had had in his sights the more or less familiar and conventional ways of success, I no doubt would have been that sufferer. I would have been one who was prepared to forego vague hopes and dreams that seemed unrealizable in order to grasp the more substantial. Or else I would have been one who, for whatever reason, had already forgotten the imaginings and impulses of childhood. Had I been one who suffered from tormenting doubts in this area and wanted to rid myself of them, I would have taken stock of all the possible ways of developing myself along a more or less well laid out and secure path. Accordingly, I would have been one of the many who were prepared to have anaesthetized certain parts of their youthful conscience. If the latter has nothing to do with openness and an unwillingness to separate head from heart, then I miss my guess that this not only has a natural home in youth but a natural danger in growing older and getting on.

Is it not safe to think that, given what I could endure and what I could not, I had no choice but to stay away from work in an office, a bank, a school, an insurance company, and other places where professional comportment often means being a three-quarter self? A three-quarter expression of one's thinking, viewing, opining, feeling, and acting self? Could I ever have had it as one of my many skills and habits to leave a part of myself at home in the morning and return to it in the evening? Could it have been possible for me to have been a kind of self-explorer, self-experimenter, and, indeed, self-inventor while essentially putting on an act every day? Is there any reason not to think I wouldn't have been able to tolerate such circumstances for very long? Or any reason not to think I would have been in danger of growing violent if for some reason I were constrained to remain where I no longer wished to be?

Question all I may about the possibility of doing things differently, it is still a fact I never felt myself in revolt against my situation. And God only knows I had enough time to think about it: to measure the compass of my airy

thoughts and inclinations against the solid acreage that others staked out. Two desirables, to be sure, but to the first, already bequeathed to me, I felt myself a privileged heir: the very lord of a boundless and magnificent domain, a land of never-ending surprises, adventures, and discoveries. To be unimpeded in thought and imagination, to go wherever one had the strength and daring to go, always seemed to me the greatest blessing and highest honour that could be conferred on a life. All else about it, be it as rough and unpleasant as might be, came with the territory that, as an elevated self, as a sort of prince in disguise wandering about his kingdom and taking it all in at close hand, I traversed with an inquisitive and almost voluptuous eye.

– *What's he saying?*

– *I don't know. But I wish he'd do it on his own time.*

I'm struggling with the idea that I couldn't have done it all differently. That I'm not just deluding myself with this rationalistic reconstruction of the past. I wanted to feel the extraordinary near to me. If I couldn't have gone to the Himalayas without forfeiting my university studies or if I couldn't have changed my approach to these studies without forfeiting the sense of a spiritual Himalayas, what other choice did I have? University lay open to me but only as a relatively narrow path that had to be navigated with care and precision. Everything that I drew from these studies had to be complementary to my other thoughts or else I would have surely lost my way. With the tragically heroic being such a predominant theme in these studies, how could I have pulled this off without having a commensurate self-image? And if I were not to be truly preposterous in this admittedly ill-defined and often barely known venture, how could I have managed it without taking on those activities and projects that at least didn't grossly contradict it?

– *When an author of note speaks on such matters, it may be of interest. But when one is not such an author but is nonetheless trying to convince oneself and others that one should be recognized as such, then it's almost painfully embarrassing because, quite frankly, the author in question simply hasn't earned the right to his sense of self-importance.*

I realize that part of my effort is to make the claim that no one has ever held to the subject of truth-telling with greater persistence than I have. It may grate upon the nerves to hear it so proclaimed but it certainly can't be faulted for being coy and indirect. I move towards an elaboration of this claim with the belief that it is no less than an indispensable part of my

subject. There is then in some sense a constantly self-justifying effort that, paradoxically enough, endangers it. But whatever redemptive or corrective element there is in all this (and I of course take it that there is) lies in the fact that even this endangering aspect is part of my subject, part of what I endeavour to take up and tell the truth about.

*– He stands on guard for truth-telling and even against himself. In the meantime the subject finds no centre except his own self-centeredness.*

I forego the conventions that make it appear that it is otherwise for most human beings. As much as we draw the world into ourselves, it is our stage and set that is similar to but never exactly the same as those of others. One meets certain people, one reads certain books, one sees certain sights and, no matter how multiple and varied these are, the result is a unique configuration of ideas, emotions, and images. If I spend so much time on my thinking, feeling, and imagining self, it is not to shut out the rest of humanity (what an absurdity this would be?), but rather to tell the truth about the relation of the one to the other.

*– He's reduced us to mere shadows of ourselves and this is what he wants to hold up as representative of what he's taking on.*

Let me be clear about one thing. I see a great gap between the manual labourer I was for so many years and an Einstein, a Galileo, or a Newton. Never did my mind focus with laser-like intensity on a few particular problems that arose as question marks in a more or less well-defined field. Never did I study to become the grandmaster of this or that game but rather moved from one to the other with the dilettantish interest and passion of a collector. Consequently whatever I had to deliver still remained embryonic at an age when others have already brought forth a fully formed scientific or artistic work (or even a body of works). Let me be called an intellectual mountebank for laying things out as I do and trying to work myself into this illustrious company *if* it so happens that all the paths to genius have been numbered and catalogued. Since no one before had thought to take the hyphen away and make truth-telling one word, I have at least this as grounds to think that a new subject has been opened up and must be treated like no other.

*– Here's the question I put to my first-year students, Andrew. The answer I was looking for was when a machine can answer all the questions put to it in such a way that the questioner cannot distinguish it from a human being, then, for all intensive purposes, it has a mind. We don't say someone*

*doesn't have one simply because he or she can't come up with original ideas. We only expect the person to formulate clear questions and answers to what's already known.*

*Let me put it this way. He or she who can grasp a field of study but not reconceptualize it is short of imagination but not mind. A machine can likewise deal with all sorts of problems but, if it doesn't do that rare thing of rendering them null and void with some new vision or theory, we wouldn't say it doesn't think else we'd all be caught short.*

I think it is in the nature of truthtelling for people to talk past each other in much the same way that characters in a Chekhov play do. Anyone who has attended a scholarly conference must have had the feeling at some point that only politeness and form prevent interlocutors from saying things like: "Excuse me. I've only been half-listening to you. Since I've already got my own point of view and since I'm here to defend it, I'm really only interested in yours insofar as I think it's coinciding or conflicting with my own."

But I know very well that such a half-listening self has been the nature of my own polemical being and, from everything I have been able to observe, the nature of polemics *tout court*. Even when it is a case of taking one's time and responding to this or that in a written debate, chances are that certain subtleties and nuances of the opponent's arguments aren't going to find their way into the counterarguments. But it is not the place here to go into this: to take up at length what should be taken up when I recount my graduate studies. All I need to say is that, even with respect to what I'm doing now, the polemical can't be dispensed with. Different points of view link a whole constellation of elements that leave virtually nothing untouched. Nothing that isn't resonating and reverberating and having the same effect on something else. As much as one sometimes wishes for consensus and agreement, it would assuredly mean, if taken to the extreme, the computerization of human intelligence. Yet short of a decimation of the human race that would only leave machines behind, this intelligence rests forever implicated and even over-implicated in all else. It is my task to give testimony to this for reasons that, as I have already demonstrated, lose themselves in the heterogeneity of a lived life.

*– Am I to be frightened? Am I to be cowed? Am I to turn my back on the tradition of thought that has been the very backbone of all human achievement? Am I not to think that Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel and so many others are giants to this puny rebel? Has the tradition not shown itself sufficiently strong and flexible to take in – and I would almost*

*say pass by if not take in – a thousand such sideshow philosophers? You know the old saying: the dogs bark while the caravan goes by. So it is with his present puffing himself up that, like his poor sister's ego, only needs the pinprick of saying "Passons!" to deflate it to nought.*

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