

22. The Phantasmagorical Element

At bottom there is this phantasmagorical element that cannot be dismissed. At bottom I have perhaps always wanted to capture this element so pulsating in the mind when thoughts aren't being marshaled for argument or opinion. It seemed to me that such a living force couldn't be subtracted from so-called higher reasoning without exaggerating the social compact and all rights and privileges due it. At least this was my thought if truth, the almost universally acclaimed value, ideal, or principle, the esteemed centrepiece of generations of hard thought by the best and most knowledgeable minds, the sine qua non of the university's integrity and its mission to the young and the community at large – if truth were all this and so transported to the skies that it should be worth dying for.

The heroic, the tragically heroic, the dramatic, the Socratic, and the erotic all did a dance in my head while I pursued my studies. Every other element that did so can, I think, be subsumed under these headings. Still, so much lost to memory that once blew about in the fan of my mind. It is easy enough to dismiss it now as the non-essential, the ephemeral, and in point of fact, I have little choice but to dismiss it. I'm not where I was in the past except by an act of will to pick out the most discernible elements. I can't follow the mini-events and mute changes in me that went on from day-to-day, week-to-week, and month-to-month. So much fiction would be required to write all this and, given that I'm not a gifted fiction writer, it is a good thing my subject is truth-telling and myself only in relation to it. But at least it is worth going on record with this lack or flaw that, paradoxically enough, fiction might make up. Essentially what I'm missing are the finer brushstrokes that can only come when one goes right to the living moment.

– What're we in all this? Fossilized errors? Living monuments to the past we betrayed? Oh, Theo, I'm never going to play Hamlet.

Over and over again I'm confronted with the difficulty of relating telling the truth about myself to telling the truth about truth-telling. If I don't pay enough attention to the first, I risk concealment and, if I pay too much, eccentricity. Not that the latter should be occulted (then I would be paying too little attention to myself), but only that it should go hand in hand with a constant engagement with and elaboration of the other. In addition, there must always be, as a third element, the question what does this other – this or that particular other – reveal about my subject? If truth-telling is what I claim it is, namely, complication and even over-complication, then the danger shouldn't lie in there being a lack of pertinent things to say but rather an overabundance. But this very overabundance can lead towards

impertinence – towards at least its seeming so – and what is there to check this drift but the highest level of interest and attention? In other words, I must always be entertaining the doubt that I'm not on course so that no sooner is this doubt dead and buried than it springs up again.

– Comments? He's waiting for comments. You're getting pretty stewed, aren't you, Andrew?

– "The cabin boy, the cabin boy, the dirty little nipper." No, that's not right! Vulgarity has always repelled me. Theo, I've a confession to make to you.

– What is it, Andrew?

– I'm gay.

– So was Wittgenstein, Andrew.

– I know. Damned better man than me though, wasn't he?

Never taking notes, I nonetheless always listened very attentively. By and large the university professors I encountered didn't fall below the general expectations I had of them. To say that I was at war with them is a sort of necessary hyperbole that, in the economy of things, assures at least a clearly recognizable disposition. For despite the surface civility and good will that characterized virtually every moment of my university life save one period, there was a certain level of aggressiveness in my attitude and approach that, first, not only showed up in class but in my very writing assignments. Second, never slackened over twenty-five years of being a part-time and then full-time student. And, third, issued from the feeling that I not only had to prove myself different from but superior to those whom I listened to so attentively.

– Oh, damned! Now he's going to give us "Anatomy of a Genius." Is there anything more insufferable than somebody telling you you should take him to be one rather than letting his work do it?

– But this is his work, Theo.

– Work? You call this ragout a work? Take me to Quine. Take me to Wittgenstein. Take me to any of those books you have on your shelves. Those are works, Andrew. Hard well-reasoned attempts to find out the truth.

– And what if it's not wrong to say it's all a ragout if taken together, as Montaigne points out?

– Montaigne?

– I read him quite seriously once, Theo. You see, his influence on Shakespeare. The fact is the Bard himself didn't seem to uphold any position or doctrine.

– Where are we? In the English department? Chalmers, go see if the fumes are out of the stairwell. Maybe we can get out of here.

In truth, the other I carry about in me and that gets a partial representation here with the voices of Andrew Chalmers and Theo Baumgarten – this other helps me to carry along a self-doubt or suspicion about me that I feel obliged to address. One thing I can take credit for, I think, is pushing through this process as conscientiously as possible. The upshot is, while giving the appearance of being more egoistic than others by simply not hiding my egoism, I put it on trial in a way that very few do or think pertinent to their various displays of knowledge.

If I had spent my time simply trying to trip up professors in class, I would have likely been less interested in learning than in trying to compensate for feelings of inferiority. Certainly the latter weren't entirely absent and, if I had to characterize them in a word or two, I would say they corresponded to my idea at the time of what it was to achieve a doctoral degree. When I first started my studies, it wasn't even with the aim of getting a BA and, what is more, I was proceeding so slowly – sometimes only a course per year – that an MA or a PhD seemed out of sight. It was in this context that, while not coveting these signs of recognition and achievement more than success as a writer, I was far from being dismissive of them.

– I'm burdened that my daughter didn't get that post at Dalhousie. She had her heart set on living in Nova Scotia.

– She didn't follow you in philosophy, Theo. Instead she joined the ranks of the woolly-headed deconstructionists.

– I'm not talking about that, you woolly-headed — I'm talking about her happiness. Do you know where the poor girl ended up?

How am I to give an account of my various confrontations with authority

that, as it seemed to me, were a true and proper reflection of keeping everything open to Socratic questioning? How am I to strike the difference between what I did in the way of challenging authority as tradition and challenging it as current practise? To be sure, the first was usually conducted on that normally humble field called written assignment and the other on that one called classroom participation. Aggressive and audacious in both, I nonetheless adhered to a principle of reasoned argument. Certainly I allowed that I might be wrong in this or that but never simply because some authority claimed as much. I tried to be as open and undogmatic as I could and, although I won't say I was entirely successful, I will say I never ran away from a counter-argument.

– I've got the feeling, Andrew, that we're here for colour commentary. To relieve his discourse of its odious — what the devil is that?

– Writing on the wall. As if it were coming from an overhead projector.

– What do you make of it?

– Comments. Like a professor would write on a student's paper.

– Not very flattering ones, are they?

– Well, the professor's presumably of the opinion that, taken one way, his argument is right but taken another it's wrong.

– Only could you get that kind of waffling in an English course. Andrew, one day she's going to regret it.

– You mean accepting that post in Arkansas?

– No, no, I'm talking about choosing to explore the richness of the text, as she calls it, over good clean argumentative rigour.

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