

28. *The Return*

When I made the decision to abandon my playwrighting efforts and return to university, it was with the feeling that I was being true to Nietzsche's spirit even while, ironically enough, taking a direction roughly the reverse of his. Between the critical point in his life where, at age thirty-four, he quit his post as a professor of philology at Basel University to go off into the scholarly wilderness and the critical point in mine where, at age forty, I signed up as a full-time Honours student in English literature and philosophy, there was no difference that I could detect in the one area that mattered most to me. How was I to push my free spiritedness as far as it would go if I didn't take on Academia? How was I to turn my serpents into dragons, to use Nietzsche's recipe for becoming a hero, if I didn't take my disquietude and disagreement to a higher level?

– One thing I'm thankful for in this life is that I've been able to get around and see a fair bit of the world. Different customs, different peoples. Makes one appreciate what one has here.

– You've always been a globetrotter. I remember in particular that time you went to South Africa.

– Yes, apartheid was starting to fall apart and my wife's relatives were caught in the thick of it.

– I remember you told me some of their fields were burned.

– As well as their barn, Andrew. All that happened only five days after we'd left them and gone to Israel.

– How lucky you were to get out of there before all that happened.

– We wanted them to leave but they refused. They insisted they had to see it through.

– It's terrible what hatred and prejudice can do.

– These kind of people, Andrew, are not to be found anywhere. They were willing to die — oh, Andrew, can you believe it? Some of their children go into the homes of the very families that, with white hoods and brandishing torches, came to their home in the middle of the night and, with the most abject cowardliness and ruthless display of force, denounced them as traitors for doing what was right.

Besides the fact that my return to the university corresponded with the end of my being able to call myself a playwright and, more properly, an aspiring one (a static position over thirteen years but at least it offered *some* status), there was also the fact that it came at a time when I could no longer call myself a construction worker. Shortly following the deaths of my sister and my father was the death of the company I had worked for for sixteen years. I wasn't tempted to go to work for any of the rival companies because I had already heard enough about their shoddy practises. After a few meagre attempts to find comparable or altogether different work, I ended up being satisfied with driving taxi full-time. But of course were it not for the fact that I viewed it as a transitional affair, a means to an end, an ongoing expression of my errancy, I would have been hard put to bear the stigma of lowliness and lack of ambition attached to it.

– *Leroux brings up the oddest things.*

– *What now, Andrew?*

– *Well, the other day, he mentioned that university profs are far down on the list of professionals respected by the public.*

So now my whole bent was to go up the academic ladder as a student and only as a student as far as I could. To go up it without losing myself in the process and so without having any concrete or definite plan to capitalize on. Looking ahead, I saw a doctoral degree coming to me in about ten years if all went well. I saw a long voyage and adventure that, though I might end up shipwrecked, would at least fill my sails with the highest level of interest and satisfaction. And, finally, I saw myself vaguely bringing all to maturity in one massive creative effort.

– *It's time for the new game, Andrew.*

Perhaps it is at this point I should make first mention of a matter that I will no doubt have to expound upon more fully later. It pertains to what could be called a performative contradiction, an ironic instability and weakness right at the heart of one's greatest show of strength and courage. It also pertains to what a good citizen could bring against a free spirit in the way of charging him with his own form of hypocrisy. In this I'm reminded of a university professor who, speaking some years ago at a conference in commemoration of Nietzsche, took umbrage at the fact that he quit the university so early and, no longer earning a living for himself like most capable and responsible people, was satisfied to live off the small pension he received. At the time I

thought her comment was petty and lowbrow but, with the considerations that now come to me, I can see that what she perceived as an element of freeloading and abuse, as an economic dependence on the system sharply at odds with a destructive critique of it, is a bind that leaves the door open to someone like her accusing someone like Nietzsche of living in a glass house. And so must I qualify my own situation for, living in a society that provided for me when, on a couple of occasions, I was unemployed or injured, that allowed me to seek out a higher education at a university, that loaned me significant sums of money when I decided to prolong it, I was subject to bringing into my condition an element of freeloading and abuse even though, for the longest time, I prided myself on not doing so.

– You and I, Andrew, have been strapped to our responsibilities many a time when we would've liked to have chucked them. We've had to accept the gruelling and unpleasant parts of the job so that everyone could get what they came here for.

Once I had decided to pursue graduate studies, it was pretty clear to me that I was going to be shifting my attention from the literary to the philosophical. At least so I viewed the matter as a formal or systematic undertaking that would provide me with the greatest challenge and the most comprehensive grasp of the Western tradition. For this reason as well as for a couple of others, the thought of pursuing graduate studies in English literature as an ever-deeper involvement with literary theory and criticism left me cold. On the one hand, I had a limited interest in this field apart from what I myself did in it. On the other, it brought me too close to where I had failed and, as a consequence, it inevitably registered with me as a kind of yielding or surrender. A being satisfied with second-best, with no longer trying to attain the heights.

– I'm sure I would've got nowhere. Then where would I have been? Where would I be now? As an actor, I mean. After all, it's only a very few that get to the top. And so for the rest, well, it's precarious. Good for perhaps one's early and middle years but then, with old age, what does one end up doing? Working as a dispatcher for a cab company?

– What're you bringing this up for?

– I don't know. It just popped into my head.

– You've been a professor for thirty years. You've done a wonderful job. I've been thinking, Andrew. I'm going to tell those two know-it-alls when I see

them again that your teaching methods, though they of course differ from mine, are impeccable.

I could have speeded things up for myself. I could have got my Honours degree in one year instead of two. But then I would have had to choose between specializing either in English literature or in philosophy. With my graduate studies still ahead of me, I decided to specialize in both subjects. My only reason for doing so was that, just as had been the case in the past, I was committed to making my university studies as pleasurable and as interesting as possible.

– Was für ein Zug ist das?

It was with no shortage of confidence and enthusiasm then that I rode into the university just about the time that a relatively new current of thought had ensconced itself there. Feminism of course had been in the air for quite some time. But between 1984 and 1991, the period I was away from the university, it had definitely intensified and infiltrated the institution in a much more noticeable and even obtrusive way. I disliked it for a number of reasons that issued as much from prejudice as perspicacity. In order to sum up the matter as best as I can, I feel obliged to say that just as I felt somewhat vulnerable to it, so I felt its own vulnerability. The human all too human in me was simply the human all too human in it from a different angle. And what was this human all too human if not idealism mixed with the will to power? On the one side the will to equity or equality in an already ascending and largely privileged group. On the other a will to truthfulness in a person already ensconced in a traditionally masculine and even hyper-masculine identity. What was my view of myself if not one that was instinctively a separation from and elevation above the other? And what in effect was my vulnerability if, as was the case, I had included in that other the mass of men and their middle-class values?

– Andrew, we all have egos just as we all have bodies. And just as out of modesty and respect for others we — dammit, you did it again! How is that possible?

– You're only in check, Theo.

– Only in check, he says!

– Theo, calm down. As far as I can see, you can still move your —

- My queen. And then what? Your bishop will take her.*
- Well, then try protecting your king with your —*
- Don't tell me how to play the game. I'll figure it out. Let's see, if I — no, that won't work. I'll lose my bishop to yours. Then if I move my rook to the corner, I'll get eaten by your queen. God Almighty, Andrew, do you think it's fair to play like this?*
- What do you mean?*
- Letting me think you haven't got a chance of winning and then playing like fucking Kasparov.*

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