

3. Adolescence

As an adolescent I experienced my life as being ordinary only in that painfully contradictory way of living it as a destiny. Living it then on the two contrasting levels of the intellectual and the imaginative. The first was often a sense of deficiency and letdown while the second was often a burgeoning hope and dream. The first the rite of passage I took cognisance of but, despite this awareness and despite whatever tricks of radiance promised a great and glorious future, the lack of confidence and reassurance that all the heterogeneous and motley welter of things could be redeemed. This often bitter-sweet refrain of my innermost thoughts and feelings was always taking leave of but never failing to rejoin the constant key in which my fantasies were played. For despite all setbacks and disappointments, I still went about thinking some miracle was in the offing, some radical transformation, some inner movement or outer development that would revolutionize the seemingly flat, humdrum, and uninspired aspects of my life. Perhaps in saying this, I'm not saying much more than that the idea of the extraordinary was firmly planted in me and never once took its leave.

I suppose I was looking for one of those little tricks of radiance that, had it been in my power, would have gone on indefinitely (and this, as the naive turn of my thoughts towards the future, was itself the true sign of my having left childhood) when one of my uncles, shortly after our arrival in Winnipeg, suggested I go spend some time on his ranch. During the two or three weeks I was there, I was in the company of a young man who was kind to me and gave me my first experience of being treated like an adult. And this I can say despite and all the more for a small incident that didn't show him as being particularly kind on one occasion and to which I reacted with child-like tears. For whatever the cutting remark he came out with then, it was part of our day-to-day sitting in the kitchen or working outside and my being able to listen to him express his views on many subjects.

Finding out from him that my uncle was a spendthrift and a gambler was one thing. But finding out that he was with a monied woman who was largely responsible for keeping him in the chips was another. If I had never laid eyes on this decidedly unpleasant person (I can't say we met because she largely ignored me) who owned the ranch and was paying most of the bills, perhaps I wouldn't have felt as repulsed by this as I did. As it was, I could hardly believe that such a man as my uncle, virile, proud, and always carrying himself around like the proverbial cock of the walk (he was an avid hunter, had owned a small plane, and, during the Second World War, had been a deep-sea diver), would let himself get into such a – at least seemingly – humiliating position. It seems that Ross, his hired hand, inadvertently drew the picture of it and made me reflect on something I definitely didn't want as

my destiny.

Which brings me to my second uncle who put the first one in the shade when it comes to a preoccupation with property and business. Owner of a real-estate agency and a racehorse farm, he was a man definitely in a hurry. Yet it has to be said that, despite this, he helped my mother in the beginning and took me under his wing. But this care or concern for me certainly didn't extend to my personal life or emotional well-being. He was friendly enough when the mood was upon him but could also be cold and insensitive. He never abused or exploited me the four summers I worked for him but neither did he do anything that wasn't in his interest. As for the rest, it is enough to say that, many years later, I found out what kind of tricks he could play on innocent and helpless people.¹

But I saw enough shenanigans of a lesser sort going on those summers at the racetrack to make me realize that honesty only stretches so far. That though it functions as an active principle most of the time and as an ideal virtually all of the time, it can be suspended whenever it gets in the way of other values. I wasn't particularly put off by this since I derived from it a sense of my own moral superiority. With a certain youthful naivety, I felt I was capable of some higher purpose or mission that would also be honest through and through. I would be able then to avoid the worst of the human lot that I took to be selling oneself off by dribs and drabs. Of course I had little understanding then of all the ramifications of such an idealization and so continued to think for a long time I could win a great deal.

On this note I should mention that a certain contradiction or tension has always been a part of my life and was even then felt by me. A tension which perhaps can best be summarized by saying that, while I imagined myself growing up straight and true so I might take up some noble pursuit, what I desired most immediately and sometimes with reckless abandon were the things of this world. In brief, I hungered for sexual gratification and social recognition as if they were the summit of all human happiness.

The sort of school and classrooms I was thrown into as an adolescent were normal enough. The teachers were invariably competent without being brilliant. The students were reasonably friendly without anyone overwhelming me with friendship. (I found no one to play Tom Sawyer to my Huck Finn.) My fellow students were divided into the usual three types: those who excel in class, those who excel outside it, and those who fall somewhere in-between. It was in this middle group I found myself because I no longer wore the laurels I had formerly enjoyed.

It strikes me now that, at an age when many people play the rebel for perhaps the one and only time in their lives, I was unquestionably conservative. Though I didn't run across much that was outrageous as a junior high and high school student, there were always at least a few students who didn't sit in class as docile as I did. That I never took it into my head to emulate them even though there were some I definitely admired is a point that, in retrospect, seems significant. Even though I continued to be devoted to physically and mentally developing myself, I was now confronted with a shakeup that went very deep. Despite winning a friend or two and a modest amount of acceptance from others, I was highly conscious of desiring the complete fulfilment of desire. Indeed, there was a part of me that, if I somehow could have had it, would have sold off the other part with dismaying alacrity.

Viewed from where I stand now, the fact that I have never abandoned my childhood sense of what I should be or turn out to be is not a simple affair. It is not simply due to some durable or commanding trait that made me hold to my course despite every obstacle. No, the situation was always much more complicated and precarious because, in order to be what it was, it depended on a certain stinginess that life is often guilty of but, in retrospect, to be commended for. I think the best way to put it is to say that, had I been a bit more outgoing or physically attractive, I would have joined that group of socially assured and active teenagers who seemed to bear all happiness with them. I would have been swayed over to their values and, at least for a time, changed to fit in with them. I would have likely found less and less advantage in saying strictly what I thought and more advantage in pleasing others.

Things falling out as they did, some nugget of resistance remained in me and kept me from making the least overture to those I secretly admired and envied. To be sure, shyness and timidity played no small part in this but, important as these factors were, they should be weighed against another. Even then I had a strong sense of not wanting to let myself (or others) down and so, had it not been for an ideal or principle of this sort operating in me, I would have surely found a way to get over my hangups and be the type of person that, apart from this principle, I wanted to be.

On the other hand, I felt I was committing a transgression every time I wanted to gratify myself as well as shame that I was unable to do so. Wanting only the most beautiful and voluptuous, I more or less set myself up for a good deal of heartache. Of course there was always the outlet of imagining myself the irresistible hero who would one day win his princess.

Although I was never quite clear on what sort of hero I would be, I fantasized an encounter, event, or development so wonderful and overwhelming that no material considerations would enter into it.

After having completed what was a rather unpleasant year at school, I spent the whole summer alone on my uncle's racehorse farm. Doing various chores and more or less looking after the place, I had ample time for all sorts of thoughts and daydreams. And despite the profound longing I often had for a bosom friend, this hermitage-like existence was not without its charm. Indeed, it allowed me to give my imagination free rein while I worked hard all day and felt my adolescent body grow stronger. I also had the opportunity to contemplate many diverse things as well as experience poignant moments of natural beauty. An invincible sense of optimism sometimes would descend on me because I knew I was still tender in years and had so much ahead of me. It was like a promise of being able to lift myself out of all that seemed still too mean and harsh. I naively thought that, simply by going from boyhood to manhood with a wondrous hope and expectation, I would eventually come to realize them.

But well do I know that the resemblance I bore then to a young Rousseau goes much further than simply contemplating the beauty and wonder of nature. Just as there were occasions on which that sensitive soul plunged into something crude and animal-like, so there were occasions on which I suspended all thought of becoming a hero and became instead a gross scallywag ready to employ any ruse to feel up his younger sister. And although this taking advantage of her ended without serious mishap (but this is an open question and more remains to be said), I was nonetheless starting to get a glimmer of what a monster I could turn into.

As I grew ever more aware of how much I was kept in check by such forces as shame and humiliation, it became ever more difficult for me to think of myself as being directed solely by some *higher* nature. It seemed to me then that I was flagrantly lacking in purity and that, only if life weren't so stingy and yielded more to me, I would straightaway ascend to my proper rank and station. But while there were definitely those occasions on which I felt I was capable of communing with all that is lofty, so there were those which were not inspiring and even testified to some gross deficiency.

What I count my later wisdom of seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary was of course far from me then. On the other hand, so much of what I experienced was still new and strange that, even if it inevitably brought with it a good deal of disappointment, I remained unflaggingly hopeful. And this

despite thinking that, because my life wasn't filled with the intensity and excitement of an epic film, there was something wrong with it.

I was still too young at this time to distinguish between affairs of the heart and affairs of the mind. And to know that, when it comes to the former, the greatest and most intense moments of happiness are difficult to sustain even in favourable conditions. Such being the case, on the rare occasions when some girl I was attracted to showed an interest in me, I immediately took this to be the standard of what pleasure and happiness should be. At the same time I was so sensitive to any falling off from this that a truly painful state always lay as close to my heart as shadow to sunlight.

But the truth of the matter is that some female Mephistopheles could have prompted a radical transformation. There is a degree of voluptuousness and eroticism which, had it been unleashed early in my life, would have made short work of my highest aims and aspirations. Being seduced almost against my will by such a power would have been like dying to myself. It would have conquered me almost without a struggle because it would have offered me what I desired most and without the long hard struggle of winning it. Without the exacting and demanding business of changing myself in order to win it. That is, by a certain conformity, by no longer keeping faith with what the other side of me had to offer. But the fact that no such power ever came into my life meant that I could only be tempted on a few brief occasions. Or if I go so far as to exonerate myself of blame in my worst transgressions by hypostasising this temptation, I can say that it sometimes took the form of those who became vulnerable to me. By this lapse of responsibility I'm able to describe this power as well as my weakness and at the same time the very zone where I was capable of risking all.

How much stands or falls then on these powerful influences which the world brings to us when we are very young or else keeps at a distance. I have often cursed the lack of eroticism in my life (which essentially means the lack of sex) and yet I know that, precisely because of this lack, eroticism has constantly recharged my highest aims and aspirations. Whatever I suffered on account of this lack was always tinged with a certain melancholy never far from a resurgence of hope that some day all would turn out well. Because these imaginings always remained vague yet consummate and exalting, I never thought of meeting a woman and getting married in a real down-to-earth sense. Rather, it was always as the happy stumbling upon and being swept off my feet by the perfect partner and playmate. Anything less froze my blood because it seemed to make the game of life hardly worth the candle. In this way I set my sights very early on a sort of perfection which

could never be attained and which, far from being the religious or utopian visions that sweep others off their feet, manifested itself as the will to be worthy of this imagined lover.

But whatever this will to perfect myself was in its earliest and indeed later stages, it was certainly no attempt to purge myself of the erotic. Never having been subjected to the worst of religion and always in fact free to give it the critical eye, I couldn't relate to it or at least a good part of it except as a bloodless adjunct. The short period of Bible studies forced on me when I was eight (it was an aged and very unpleasant teacher called Miss Mills who took up these early morning readings) hardly did more than introduce me to the Old and New Testaments as literature. Unlike Rousseau and other Christian thinkers past and present, I didn't grow up in surroundings filled with the ardent desire for personal salvation. The most that can be said is that the element of purity in religion, however humble and austere, had its impact on me. A church spire or a story drawn from the Bible certainly inspired thoughts of a less tawdry way of existence. By contrast to what I often felt inside and saw around me, this world of religion seemed to speak only of the simple, the pure, the purposeful, and the highly significant. Not jangly life but solemn music. Not superfluous or incoherent utterances but lofty speech and impeccable diction.

And it was a world certainly not short of the extraordinary. The creation of heaven and earth in seven days, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the parting of the Red Sea, the temptation of Christ by the devil, the miraculous curing of the sick, the walking upon water, the Crucifixion, the final Ascension with the short return to Earth – all these were stories which fascinated me without ever engendering the belief they bore the same order of truth as other stories or accounts. More than I was drawn to the Christian faith by these stories, I remained suspicious of it. I who was then but a child and who was already conditioned by some contrary ideal had no desire to be led into thinking that piety and human weakness should be paramount concerns.

But youth to the youthful imagination is almost equal to feeling invulnerable and immortal whereas in later life the looming shade makes us think twice about all the significance with which we charged our youthful lives. What is the power of the Bible if not its truth about human weakness? Human weakness not in any ordinary sense but in a cosmic one. In the sense that not only human beings but human meaning itself is imperilled. And not just on a local but on a cosmic level. And yet what we give to ourselves on this highest level is never quite identifiable with ourselves such that what is so

produced comes to us only *through* us and so in fact *beyond* us. To this extent all our thoughts are a product of and participant in some infinite hyper-meaning and belong to it as much as to ourselves.

Thus all can be looked upon as a plethora of gifts fitting the various moods, shapes, and conditions of humanity. Tragic humanity! Never will it be resolved that such a bounteous condition must come at such a high price. Never, never, never and yet when I was fifteen, I read about the Second World War with as much fascination for Hitler and the war machine as revulsion at the cold-blooded extermination of innocent people. Identifying with these hapless victims at one end of the spectrum and monumental will and power at the other, I alternated between being a winged avenger of the first and an enthralled spectator of the second.

Always conscious of these inner vicissitudes, I at the same time never felt compelled to get rid of them. Or if I did, it was not for very long: the largely Christian ethic blowing in upon me at times couldn't uproot the one already in place. The one holding me more towards dutiful suspicion than dutiful trustfulness.

The further readings I undertook seemed to confirm me in this attitude. Anything which smacked of the human was capable of the most surprising shifts and turns. Among other things, I found out that an allegedly Christian nation could go to war with other Christian nations. That a highly cultured society could descend to barbarism. That good solid townspeople were able to turn their backs on a nearby death camp. That others could risk their lives to save people from the same. That many churches and universities were capable of meekly falling into line with an anti-Christian and anti-intellectual order. And, finally, that people from these same and other milieus were later able to produce a profusion of engrossing works out of the ashes of so much that had been laid barren and waste.

Politics (W. B. Yeats)

*How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics?
Yet here's a travelled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there's a politician
That has read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true*

*Of War and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms!*

What if an evil genius were to come to me right now and say: "It is time to drop the pretence that going on about your years of growing up and then knocking about from pillar to post and then reading and writing and studying philosophy will add something new to what you have already said. It is time to admit that the end of your project is already at the beginning and so, philosophically speaking, you have said all you have to say and what remains is solely on the level of the personal." How should I answer this evil genius? Should I deny his criticism? Should I say that, while it is true that where I have begun is largely where I have ended up and *will* end up, there still remains the question of *why* I ended up where I have and not somewhere else? Or even the more penetrating question of why I didn't go off the rails completely? Doesn't this wavering itself pertain to the subject? For even if it is true that I'm full of confidence and courage on most occasions, it is also true that I have often felt them drain out of me. But then again, it must be admitted that, were it otherwise, I would hardly be inspired by a heroic ideal precisely in the area of truth-telling. And even though this ideal itself may waver (this happens when I consider the indomitable souls who slave away without paying much attention to it), I still think that the subject is not to be exhausted by a few simple statements, be they negative or positive, and that it demands a patient and lengthy working out.

Upon entering high school, I was acutely conscious of not being all I wanted to be. The discomfort I felt ranged from thinking of myself as a kind of social misfit to everything I chanced to envy in others. This itself ranged from wanting a better-shaped nose or a deeper voice to coveting someone else's girlfriend. But most consistently on the list of envied things were such real or imagined traits as personal attraction, masculinity, and muscularity (which went with the second). While the second and third eventually took up residence, the first eluded me completely. When I consider now how turned in I was on myself and how carefully I kept a distance from others, it is small wonder I didn't charm many people. The desire to close the distance and yet keep it intact were forever the crosscurrents of my adolescence. Ultimately what I wanted was the *other* person to do it and in such a way that, if it had ever come about, he or she would have been little better than a willing slave.

I couldn't imagine the highest level of attraction other than as a perfect mind in a perfect body. Though I was far from having immersed myself in the

world of the ancient Greeks, it nonetheless exerted its pull on me. All that it symbolized in the way of highest learning and culture fused imperceptibly in my mind with the heroic look of a muscular Zeus or Apollo or the stately figure of an Athene. To want to be as these were is of course to want to be god-like. Being young and free to think all possibilities of a promising and self-gratifying sort, I didn't stop to consider how unreasonable this desire was or that the perfecting of one part of me might interfere with that of another. Certainly there was enough evidence to show that, generally speaking, those people who seriously seek perfection concentrate in one area and in fact sacrifice much to arrive at it. Yet the thought of being so artistic or intellectual as to abandon my physical development or to be so patently narcissistic as to run away from every other concern and consideration – both of these were equally repugnant. In a way I wouldn't like to remind myself of too often, I consigned myself to a certain mediocrity that only an act of will has kept me from recognizing or tolerating to this very day.

Having already played hockey for a number of years and showing very little talent for this sport, I decided to join the high school cross-country team. Here again I was mediocre or at least at the beginning and distinctly remember being beaten in the first few practise sessions by an outstanding girl. Later I would fall in love with her and experience one of the many rejections I have suffered at the hands of the opposite sex. Although neither having the kind of body I would call voluptuous nor an intellect I would call outstanding, she was certainly attractive and, what is more, proved in competition she *had* in fact a superior mind and body. Perhaps this as well as her muscular legs won my heart for, all things considered, a certain female superiority has always been very attractive to me. Of course the legs have to be perfect too or whatever there may be of this superiority produces little or no effect.

Such fastidiousness bordering on fetishism is probably more common and more significant than generally admitted. Certainly the realm of truth-telling doesn't reflect or recognize it except as a subject among other subjects. How the truth-teller arrives at his subject and how he ends up treating it are generally considered irrelevant both to the subject and the treatment. As perfectly understandable as this may be and as little as it could be any other way, it keeps truth-telling from having the transparency it forever claims for itself and indeed *must* claim for itself.

Fastidiousness of another sort is my penchant for writing with some style and my dislike of all writing that slavishly follows one. Recently reading one

study, for example, I was put off by its implying it could equal or surpass others by adopting an easy accessible way of writing and thinking. Accessibility is of course a value not to be slighted or at least not if it is willing to slight itself and own up to its shortcomings.²

But my fastidiousness in writing is also manifested in another direction which goes some way against scholarly propriety. Fairness to one's adversary as feigned politeness (how often the worthy scholar is chopped up after being praised!) and fairness to historically oppressed womanhood as inclusive but inelegant language both unsettle me. Of course the scholar's fastidiousness in this area has a certain moral correctness not to be slighted (but inevitably I'll be doing this) that has definitely had its impact on other writing including my own. At the same time this correctness is by no means free of practical and strategic considerations. Not unlike the worthy politician who is forced to ingratiate himself with as many voters as possible, the scholar seeks to be read by as many worthy readers as possible. And not offending others is certainly the right approach to this and carries the best chance of being heard in the public arena. On the other hand, if one is bent on telling the truth about truth-telling, one must go beyond such politeness because one cannot tell the truth about truth-telling apart from the telling of it. To tell the truth about truth-telling is necessarily to tell the truth about this telling. Given this state of affairs which is a task, an objective, and a dilemma all rolled into one, a sinuous, expressive, and unconstrained style, essentially a *multiplicity* of styles, is what is called for.

But getting back to my fascination with beautifully formed female legs, I can safely say it played its part in taking me out of high school. It was very difficult to sit all day in a classroom with such legs but a *bare* few feet away. With such *bare* legs *baring* themselves at me and without even the *bare* possibility of touching them. I could hardly *bear* to be in their presence because they were forever just sitting there or boldly parading about or shamelessly showing themselves off. (*Why not for me? Why for others but not me?*) Certainly my daily running was an outlet and, during the winter, it became the ritual, certainly a very rigorous one, of running in knee-deep snow and in subpolar conditions. At least I could take pleasure *in that*.

But I was disappointed the following spring, when having won some recognition as a runner, I didn't find myself surrounded by adoring girls. In fact nothing at all really changed and I remained frustrated and feeling marginal. Never being very socially active as a teenager and growing more and more discomfited in groups or crowds, I imagined that someday I would meet the right girl in beautiful and choice surroundings. I imagined meeting

her in some lonely woods or on some windswept hill, some place with no social or material ties to the outside world apart from our surroundings and our physical, emotional, and intellectual attraction to each other. My naivety and self-delusion were such that I didn't realize how much I had departed from a normal expectation and how much this perfect companion was fused in my imagination with the highest level of erotic pleasure and excitement. Of course what I was hoping for was not only incongruous in itself, but also in relation to my seeking a kind of personal integrity and purity. As inwardly guarded and constrained as I was on account of this higher calling, I wasn't capable of being roundly generous and sharing of myself. How then I could have expected to win a flesh-and-blood woman either as a perfect companion or as a perfect concubine, never mind the two together, is not something I can easily explain.

My torment persisted when, for a brief two weeks in summer, I and part of my family returned to Chambly. My father no longer lived there and so my mother, my oldest sister, and I went back to take advantage of certain invitations. At the same time we intended to take in the world's fair going on in Montreal at the time. Often walking about this fair by myself, I was so overcome by desire that, despite my habitual shyness and reserve, I approached and tried to pick up girls. My efforts (clumsy and shy ones, to be sure) met with a certain limited success but ultimately I remained disappointed and frustrated. Miniskirts and bare legs were everywhere but none were so moved by desire as to camp by me. All the rest of what I saw was terribly impressive with proud pavilions, overflowing crowds, and colourful activity. I wondrously took it all in and yet at the same time was made conscious of my own lack of flare and distinction.

In Chambly I found some solace in the company of a sixteen-year-old girl whose family had been our former neighbours. As initially grateful as I was for this and as important as it was for my self-esteem, I ultimately felt let down. Most of the details are unimportant: it is enough to say that, even though this girl was far from being unattractive, she was not as lovely or as lithe or as light-hearted as I would have liked her to be. On the other hand, her twelve-year-old sister was full of charm and hung about us while we sat in the living room. I grew uncomfortably aware of being more attracted to her, as young and physically immature as she was, than to the stolid girl next to me.

It was in grade eleven that dissatisfaction with my schooling added to the misery of being sexually frustrated and socially inhibited. Before this year I had never given a thought to doing other than finishing high school and

going on to university. At the same time I had never given much thought to what I would do there. Part of the reason for this is that, during my adolescent years, I met no one – and certainly no teacher – who remotely resembled Mr. Beach. Not one soul who, like he did, took an interest in me and inspired me not only by the kind of person he was but by what he had to say about education and life. This lack of a spiritual guide meant that my thoughts rarely broke free from my most immediate concerns to offer me the advantages of a greater insight and wider viewing.

But though I probably didn't go off in a direction Mr. Beach would have approved of, at least I went off with some wind in my sails. A moral and intellectual wind in its prevailing mood is what I call it now. For though it carried me out to sea in a both scholarly and worldly sense, it eventually returned me. Who knows what part Mr. Beach played in all this: in the fact that, four years after the little exposés in his grade seven classroom, a critical attitude started to take shape in me? A critical attitude largely based on the realization that my struggle to get high grades in school was slowly stifling the spiritual side of me. And that the school itself offered nothing to remedy the situation. Nothing in the way of bolstering my flagging interest in my studies and of investing them with some purpose other than winning recognition and being stepping stones to the university. Nothing that could remind me of the excitement, adventure, and enthusiasm of learning that I had experienced as a child growing up in Chambly.

But before going on, I should note that my school was far from being ill-equipped or lacking in competent teachers or having no safety nets in place or, not to be overlooked, offering me no advantages. No, whatever was wrong with it wasn't wrong for any of these reasons but simply because all schools are systems and all systems, be they practical or theoretical, cannot accommodate all elements. Ultimately this is a philosophical issue which is also *extra*-philosophical because, going beyond all systems, it goes beyond all philosophy. At the same time it is also very much my own issue, that is, the issue of truth-telling, and therefore not just one but all issues. It is even the issue of being one issue among many insofar as truth-telling is *without* issue.

In truth, I believe I was one of these non-accommodated elements and, if I were to say that things could have fallen out differently, I would have to allow for a vastly different set of circumstances. For example, if I had gone to the kind of school my father once dreamed of sending me to, it is possible I would have found enough intellectual stimulation as well as honour, rewards, and so on to prevent the critical side of me from developing as it

did. Developing in an implicitly if not explicitly anti-institutional or anti-authoritarian way. Developing in such a way that the other agitations of my soul could eventually ally themselves to it and render it more and more like a destiny. Then the path taken by me would have been quite different and I would have become a person ready to entrust his education to the school rather than to the world outside. A person who would have found more good reasons to adapt himself to it and recognize its value than to think of it as a constraining and coercive force.

But getting back to my actual situation: as a sensible young man who knew he was in trouble and needed help, I eventually went to see the guidance counsellor. After I had told him about my flagging interest in my studies and after having given him an explanation not differing essentially from the one I'm giving now, he advised me to slow down and not take my studies so seriously. Presumably his well-intentioned advice was meant to encourage me to spend more time cultivating other interests of a less stressful and competitive sort. Nothing he said was particularly wrong but, then again, neither was it helpful. From my present standpoint, I see him as having failed to notice that I was one who, rather than needing to find more enjoyment apart from my studies, needed to find more *in* them. Or rather one who needed to find more interest in studies *outside* school such that the ones I took up in it no longer filled up my entire intellectual horizon.

What I in fact needed then was something very difficult if not impossible. Something that would have resembled me as I am now giving advice to myself as I was then. What I needed was an advisor who would have been the most sensitive and scrupulous reader of my sixteen-year-old soul. Who instead of being oblivious to the critique of formal education that was implicit in at least part of my troubled situation at school, would have picked up on it and carried it back to me as question and commentary. Who instead of assuming that my problems were purely personal and carried no intellectual weight, would have directed my attention outside the curriculum towards studies that would have enlarged my understanding of my situation and come to me both as a philosophical turn and a great psychological relief.

So far my account has been focussed on my built-in errancy and my eventual escape or self-ejection from the system. By the time I went to the guidance counsellor for help, nothing short of an extraordinary intervention would have turned things around. For a critical mass had been reached which, even before I had physically left the school, put me outside it in an imaginative or emotional sense. In all of this there was nothing on my part of bad behaviour or flagrant resistance to authority. Nothing of missing

classes or failing to do assignments. Nothing of having problems with drugs or alcohol. Nothing even of having animosity or resentment towards the school. Rather it was more like suffering a loss of confidence or faith in it while experiencing a corresponding leap of faith in or towards an out-of-school experience. Had I been asked to give an account of this, I would have been confronted with the same problem as I am now: trying to make sense out of all the motivating factors arising out of the convergence and seeming consolidation of my erotic and idealistic fantasies.

Just as I take it for granted that this errancy is a basic part of my constitution and is continuous with my father's, so I take it for granted that, so far as its intellectual side goes, it is a will to be critical and even overly critical. I also take it for granted that this will to be critical, no less than any other drive, can run to excess and even to ruin. Excess and ruin either as self-criticism on the one hand or as criticism without it. The two types of excess are well illustrated by members of my own family: by my father who was guilty of the second (particularly when he was under the influence of alcohol) and by my second-oldest sister who was guilty of the first (particularly when she was depressed and suicidal). And if now I secretly congratulate myself for escaping their tragic fates, it is probably in the way of registering performatively as much as constatively that a robust ego such as I possess and such as I like to think I possess more positively than negatively is what constitutes the greatest difference between them and me as critical and even overly critical members of the human community.

But just as there are different ways to have a robust ego, so there are different ways *not* to have one. Take two extremely intelligent people like my father and sister who happen to falter badly in life. Suppose they had good reason to think of themselves very early as being exceptional and then good reason later on *not* to. Or at least to think they were so deficient in certain areas as to fall behind entirely. Suppose further they had always believed in telling the truth both to themselves and to others such that, upon realizing and admitting they were not what they once thought they were (at least in some important respects), they were also obliged to realize and admit they had *given up* on a part of themselves. In a certain manner of speaking, their conclusion is also a choice which bears with it a certain responsibility, a certain way of looking at themselves, a certain future vision and way of acting no longer in accord with the past way. The self-justification that would inevitably arise and base itself on the exigencies of life and all that it brings in the way of the unpredictable would then not be sufficient to efface a certain sense of self-betrayal.

In describing them thus, I not only think of my father and sister as essentially alike in character but different from all those who, for one reason or another, *start off poorly*. Nothing I have ever heard about my father's childhood nor anything I know about my sister's would lead me to conclude that *they* belong to this second group. Both in fact were petted and made much of while growing up: my father by his three older sisters and my sister by my father himself. In the case of the latter, he suffered his first major disappointments – failing in his bid to become a pilot and then later an engineer – just before marrying and starting a family. In the case of my sister, the breakup of our family home was probably the greatest upset of her life. But it was only after she herself got married and had children that things started to slip out of control. For reasons that had nothing to do with her intellectual capabilities or best intentions, she abandoned first the prospect of a career in medicine, then a master's degree in chemistry, then her role as a loving and nurturing mother, and finally her life.

Surely it must be that they both started off their lives with a sort of high-flung outlook or romantic vision. They too must have had childhood fantasies that propelled them forward and that, had they been luckier, would have constituted the leading thread and mainstay of their lives. For they too, I believe, wanted honesty and courage to be there. To be pivotal to their emotional, imaginative, and intellectual well-being. To be honoured in their hearts as something most noble and high and thus render them honourable through and through. Wanted this despite the fact that one day they found themselves living more or less conventional lives with all the responsibilities of a middle-class home and family. Living in some sense apart from themselves. For the fact of the matter is that, in both their cases, raising a family to be proud of and having a fine home and prospects for the future were not sufficient to keep them going. Yet at the same time so extraordinary were they in their lack of artificiality and pretence and so obstinate and critical in many of their doings that I can only conclude they were fighting to maintain their self-esteem under conditions that were slowly eroding it.

It is difficult to go on now without the egoistic such as I have mentioned it already as both personal and philosophical element trying to efface itself. And yet it is difficult to go on without at the same time admitting to this selfsame trait or tendency. More precisely, admitting that taking up the task of distinguishing myself from others (including my father and sister) involves suppressing the fact that this task is also, as something quite personal, *a drive to distinction*. That telling the truth about myself is irretrievably caught up in this non-innocent telling even while it pretends or acts otherwise. This

is as much as to say that ultimately I cannot refrain from treating all positions, including my own, as being contained in my own truth-telling. Or to put it another way: I'm continually advancing to the point of failing as a truth-teller, to the point of reaching my own limits in this area. And this not only in the way of no longer seeing how my truth is related to the telling of it, but of presuming that, against my proper judgement, this truth can be told *without* egoism (which, to add another wrinkle, is no doubt the very height of egoism) and for the sake of itself and itself alone.

I shall now ask myself a few questions which, given their abstract or general nature, may very well hide their egoistic content. First of all, how can the critical and even overly critical suffer itself (that is, tolerate itself) if it is sufficiently *self-critical* to suffer from itself? And, secondly, how can the world suffer the critical and even overly critical if it at the same time suffers *from* it? Must it not be that, in both cases, if the critical and even overly critical is to survive and flourish, it will find in itself enough that is rewarding to make up for and even render null and void all injuries either to itself or the world? And therefore will it not, if it is to achieve victory both on the psychological and social front, turn itself into some kind of force, mission, duty, or destiny?

Or to take another tack: what happens if the critical and even overly critical become nothing more than the barking dogs in the basement of one's soul? If this internal hubbub and distress can neither be purged nor shut out completely from the upstairs quarters? If it is always such that, whatever joyous activity or bustling work goes on upstairs, the barking dogs of criticism and self-criticism can be forever heard in the background? Is there not then a slow poisoning or contamination of the whole house? An incipient loathing and contempt for all that has gone into furnishing it and trying to make of it a decent home? Is there not then something very wounding and self-incriminating in the thought that, for all one has done to both bless and enrich the upstairs of one's soul, one has placed a curse on it by neglecting the downstairs?

But I'm well aware that, if I'm to see myself not only as a truth-teller but as a particular kind of truth-teller and, furthermore, not only as one *in potentia* but also *per accidens*, I can't simply compare and contrast myself with those who are close to me and go awry, but also those who develop and flourish. Not an easy task given the range of possibilities but, for the moment, I can do no better than look at what I might have been had I followed a straighter path. Suppose then that an extraordinary influence had come into my life even after Mr. Beach (for I recognize him as one) and resulted in a rapid

maturing of my intellectual and emotional self. Then I would have likely been able to deal with most problems of a personal nature and carry on towards higher education and those studies of greatest interest to me. I would have in effect been carried towards all I discovered much later on and all I found in literature, philosophy, history, and so on to be inspiring. I would have been taken very early to a knowledge of the outside as well as the inside of the institutional world but without necessarily thinking that going *outside* it was preferable to staying inside. I would have then had to accommodate myself to it such that, even if my thinking pressed towards the outside, it would have borne the stamp and impress of the inside. And this in terms of not only how I would have gone about my work and studies, but of how I would have structured my life. To this extent, the rebellious side of me would have been forced to accommodate itself to the institution and, in exchange for a clear sense of mission, conform to its values and standards. Even under the best of conditions and even for the sake of the best conditions, I would have had to shut down that part of my soul which would have proved to be, under the circumstances, too much the mirror or theatre of itself. Too much a show and a distraction (not to mention a self-indulgence) in that world essentially devoted to identifying truth with itself.

It remains to be said that such a straighter path in life would not have been a curtailment of my errancy, but rather a much stricter handling of it. In other words, it would have taken much less the form of a way of life (that is, as the post-high-school period I'm about to take up) than a way of thinking already established and yet errant in relation to mainline or traditional thought. Though it is too early to move into this area as a specific concern, it might do well to signpost it now by invoking, if not without some reservations, the word *postmodernism*. A word of course that can lend itself to many interpretations but, if I were to sum it up *grosso modo*, I would say that, first, it refers to a form of thought that has infiltrated the university and other institutions during the second half of the twentieth century and, secondly, one which takes truth to be implicated in diverse elements that straddle both its subjective and objective poles. But for now I don't want to get into this but simply note that, instead of passing through and beyond institutionalized errancy as truth-telling, I would have rested there and made it my home. I would have followed the relatively obscure and wayward paths of other such dwellers and, if I were lucky, traced out, I hope not too obscurely, a path of my own.

Compared to this relatively straight and smooth path, the actual one was very rough, uneven, and circuitous. It started off with a number of years of being more imaginatively, emotionally, and physically active than

intellectually. This is certainly not to say that I was intellectually *inactive* or didn't continue to read and think deeply about many matters. No, it was just that no real discipline had to be exercised in this area because, naturally enough, there was no motivation or guidance other than what came from day-to-day. Or at least none apart from my unshakable belief that the world itself was a school and, along with books and other reading material, offered many different ways of learning. It was as if all that I had once explored as a child growing up in Chambly was now extended to many diverse fields. Of course I had already experienced enough to know that the world was not always a friendly place nor had all of its innumerable corners immaculately kept. Yet such was my romantic vision at the time that I unfailingly saw my destiny being pointed out by the most beautiful and splendid things. On the other hand, the most ugly and sordid aspects of the world seemed like the husks or dross that one could eventually shake off. At the same time I was immature or naive enough to blur the difference between the most noble and heroic path in life and the most virile or masculine one. The shadow that inevitably fell between what I desired most for myself and what I actually found often would discomfort and disappoint me terribly. Nonetheless it was never so great as to obliterate the first or make the second seem to be less than the rather slippery stepping stones (oh, but how hard one fell sometimes!) on the way to the first.

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1 His name was Harry and, when I was about fifteen, my uncle brought him out to the racehorse farm. He lived in the small tack room that was in the barn and that I myself had spent a summer in. He was a man in his fifties who was very grey and grizzled and hardly spoke to anyone. He spent most of his time either in the tack room or else cleaning stalls and feeding and watering the horses. All I knew about him at the time was that he had been in the Second World War, suffered shell shock (as I remember someone telling me), and spent many years in a psychiatric hospital. Presumably my uncle was doing him a good turn by taking him on. (I certainly can't say he took him *in* because Harry never lived anywhere but in the barn.) It was not until some fifteen years later that I got wind of another side to this story. It happened when I ran into Harry shopping and reeking of horses in a downtown store. To my great surprise, he recognized me and began talking in a way that hardly reminded me of the silent figure who went about doing farm chores. Furthermore, I found out that, despite his sixty-odd years, he owned a small motorcycle and used it to get away from the farm on occasion. Living and working on the farm over a number of years had clearly done him a world of good. He gave credit to my uncle for his improved spirits and state of mind and, given what he was soon to tell me, this was a remarkable thing. In a rather offhand way, he came out with the surprising fact that, during all the time he had been living and working on the farm, my uncle had been having him sign and hand over the monthly checks that came from the Department of Veterans Affairs and were rightfully his as a disabled war vet. Presumably this arrangement was based upon the understanding that Harry should pay for his room and board. The problem with this was that, apart from being far more than what would normally be charged for a few groceries and lodging in a barn, my uncle neglected to pay Harry for any of his work.

2 Oh, what a welter of the easy and difficult there is in criticism! Nowhere is it so easy as when this criticism comes in the form of generalities and has a target not specifically identified. (Haven't I seen this at large in scholarly work and now don't I catch a glimpse of it in my own?) And nowhere is it so difficult as when this target haunts one's own work as a voice all too similar to but less authentic (as one ultimately thinks) than one's own.

When I wrote the above criticism concerning a more or less popular style that makes popular (but only through or as itself) subjects or discourses largely unpopular because very difficult, I had no thought of commenting on the work I specifically had in mind. Instinctively I avoided an entanglement that could have gone on and taken the form of yet another essay. There was a strategic or tactical move that, although I didn't take much notice of it, caught up with me later as a discomfiting sense of having done things too easily or conveniently. So it is that this footnote responds to this discomfort and seeks to return my project to some partly illusory, partly maintained purity of intent.

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance is the work I had in mind. Though I took it to be sounding depths with a largely layman's hand, I also took it to be doing so with a dexterity and level of commitment that exceeded the merely scholarly. On the other hand, I also found it to be guilty of some sleight of hand in that, not truly sifting what it lowered or put in abeyance (i.e., the whole tradition of Western thought), it presented it as one simple strain of a collective, covert, and complicated shallowness.