

34. Formalism

It boils down to this: fighting for the freedom to choose what forms to go with and what forms to reject. To being a bit more passionate about this struggle and this freedom than the vast majority of people. Straight formality was always something I tried to subvert in my essays so that there might be at least some acknowledgement of irreducibly personal factors. Because I was quite conscious of having limited knowledge in many and indeed most areas, any attempt to repress these elements would have struck me as merely taking advantage of a certain licenced deception. Then as now, I took it that there was an implicit understanding amongst truth-tellers that, although each and everyone spoke as if he were the voice of reason itself (which I take to be the scholarly style), this was a mere formality that didn't imply that anyone thought he actually was free of all internal or external influences. But along with this was the implication – and this was what struck me as the ongoing deception – that these influences were only accidental. Or, at best, mistakes to be overcome that provided a pathway to some higher and indeed highest understanding.

– Attacking formality is a tricky business. You can hardly dispense with it – I mean the formality and not the attacking – if you're ever to get beyond mere opinion and prejudice. And of course I don't mean in any absolute sense. I mean relative to what is today mere opinion and prejudice. Pathways to a higher if not highest understanding cannot be treated as mere deception because then there would be no reason to climb out of the caves of ourselves and seek the light of truth and knowledge.

It seems the difficulty I have always been wrestling with in this essay is this thinking of truth-telling as the most rarified deception and self-deception. So rarified in fact that it stretches out of sight as truth and knowledge. So rarified again that it converts all eternity into a human habitat with forever a backyard and a field to investigate. And so rarified once more that it can't be argued with, done away with, or distinguished from all that we labour for or labour with. So much is it the character and constitution of truth-telling that sometimes it seems that it is the whole of it. After all, what else might there be but some thought that doubles back on these other thoughts, these monumental ones, and, in the very name of truth-telling itself, doubts their authenticity?

Some one thought out of a hundred perhaps. Some one thought that is erratic, out of order, and not contributing anything to truth-telling except a certain radical idealization of it. Oh, this difficulty that comes from having at least ninety-nine thoughts out of a hundred bent against it! From having ninety-nine thoughts out of a hundred squarely keeping faith with truth,

reason, and the idea of one final reckoning! Here of course I'm no different from others or at least no different from them other than by being a bit more constant and persistent in holding onto that one thought out of a hundred that eludes membership. That one thought that speaks of a truth beyond all that can bear this name but that, as much as this thought can touch or include it, speaks more truthfully than the ninety-nine thoughts that range themselves otherwise.

- Alice, you look like a girl who's just joined a religious cult.

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