

35. Egoism

I decided at the beginning that telling the truth about myself had to be one with telling the truth about truth-telling. I took it to be significant right away that there would be an irreducible element of self-promotion. Of taking the best view of myself. Of letting my egoism be part and parcel of the very attempt to tell the truth about it. Perhaps not fully realized then was that putting all this on display and objectifying it could extend even to creating and falling in love with a Pygmalion-like self-image. Falling in love with what in effect is being born in and borne by this project (I should almost say, as one putting his ego on display, borne *out*) and is both a projection of my past life into the present and my present life into the past. An indissociably aesthetic and ethical project that makes all the weakness and ugliness in this past and present life seem redeemable, necessary, transfigured as the constituents of a growing perfection. Such then is the redoubtable reaction to and overcoming of the self-contempt and self-dissatisfaction that has both spurred and scalded me throughout all my adolescent and adult years. Indeed, it was this negative side of self-examination and self-evaluation that started off this essay and then, due to what I just called or, should I say, *justly* called the redoubtable reaction to and overcoming of it, was immediately subjugated and taken over by the task of redeeming my past life by transforming my present one into its completion and consummation. So much then are these two attitudes bound together (like a wanderer and his shadow) and wherever the one seems to be solely in evidence, it is but the other in a state of total or near-total eclipse. A transitory enough affair that I hardly would wish to do away with if I'm to continue the task of trying to make my egoism one with telling the truth about it. Therefore a tension must be kept between what I want to bring forth as a full manifestation of it and what I must recognize (how else could there be this full manifestation?) as related tricks, games, subterfuge, and the like. So far it has been a see-saw battle with my ego sometimes resembling a balloon about to burst and sometimes a pin that preemptively pricks and deflates it.

– If he continues in this vein, I won't play the curmudgeon. I'll even congratulate him. I'm certainly not against exploring the self and exposing our prejudices. In fact, that's the best way to make our conversation go beyond polemics and become a transfiguring experience.

But perhaps creating and falling in love with a Pygmalion-like self-image should not be thought of as being limited to one essay or the work of one essay or the work of an essay called *On Truth-telling*. The work of this essay that is the attempt to take the whole of my life beyond the ordinary and unexceptional cannot be separated from the life that was often the rough, vague, imprecise, ambiguous effort to do just the same. Nor can it be

dissociated from the view that this final wrap-up essay, this most Pygmalion-like one called *On Truthtelling*, is not some mere addition to it but the natural outgrowth of a long period of development, struggle, and the like that might also be called, in a both strict and not-so-strict sense, a long series of essays. Nor from the view that, had I not been lucky enough to reach this wrap-up essay, I would have fallen short of reaching the stage of development where I could push my highest branches beyond the surrounding forest of truth-tellers. What I think of as my self-love, my creating and falling in love with a Pygmalion-like self-image would have run its course without ever having reached the point of articulating itself as this design and end. Speaking from the depths of this same self-love, I hold that it is no mere narcissism. Rather I'm driven with all that self-love can be as self-respect and self-engagement to articulate it as the most rarified deception and self-deception. It is indistinguishable from telling the truth as the complication and even over-complication of truth-telling.

– He's walking a tightrope over many things. But if he has good faith and generosity of spirit behind him, I'm sure he'll be able to stay on and get to the other side.

I suppose that from the very moment I imagined myself becoming a great spirit in some definite and yet still vague and uncertain enough way (definite in the sense of aiming high and vague and uncertain in the sense of what this would lead to), I was committed to a self-image that itself was a commitment to hard paths and highest objectives. Winning popularity or having tremendous ability was never the highest goal for me because it didn't involve the deepest or most comprehensive commitment. With such an outlook, I must have had planted in me at an early age the thought that failing greatly was preferable to succeeding without greatness. At least I'm inclined to believe this was so and see evidence of it in the fact that, later on in life, I remained tied to the idea of becoming a great writer when, after having determined I was fit for nothing better, I was given good reason to think I wasn't fit for it at all. To be sure, the university essays were something of an exception. Generally speaking, they gladdened my heart, brought me good tidings, and pointed towards some possibility of entering (or, if I gave my imagination full rein, exploding) onto the literary scene. Even with the shift towards studying philosophy as well as literature, I continued to believe that everything was grist for the writer's mill and that there was always the possibility of being swept up by some future inspiration – or rather wave of inspirations – that would put to use everything I had ever done or thought. Looking back, I find a certain degree of clarity and precision in striving so disjointedly for some major success. For deferring it

as a direct course or well-defined route. For finding faith and optimism even while feeling that I was simply plodding along. For when all is said and done, the university essays I wrote never forsook their status as assignments, never transformed themselves except for fleeting moments into wonderfully wrought treatises, and never were more than little scholarly efforts that could easily have lost themselves amongst better attired and more privileged ones. My awareness of this was troubling to the extent that, by not extending myself beyond this limited domain, I sensed some lack of resolve, some inner poverty, some all too scattered and heterogeneous orientation. Indeed, it was this problem of orientation I always felt because at the heart of my erratic flight was less a practical than idealistic bent, less the need to be clear on where I was headed than to be clear on what I was doing. An untroubled intellectual conscience is what I gave highest priority to and, with respect to writing university essays and all that may have troubled it, I was never so troubled as to renounce it as a trustworthy guide.

– I sometimes wish he'd fall off the rope.

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