

47. Second Letter to the Chair of the Department (1994)

"Thank you for your letter of October 27th in which you inform me of my status at Concordia University. I must confess that I was fully prepared to suffer the worst. I realize now that, given that a terrible tragedy took place at this university some two years ago, the confrontation between Professor Joós and me must have shaken up a few people. It is therefore quite right that steps be taken to prevent its recurrence."

– What terrible tragedy?

"Having said the above, I must now, even though I take the risk of being misunderstood, challenge any suggestion that I should be considered a person of poor judgement. (You write: 'Your capacity for self-control and good judgement in respecting the dignity and safety of others will continue under probation by this Department.')

I acted the way I did because I was caught in an intolerable situation. If Professor Joós had treated me with respect, the chances of this incident occurring would have been nil."

– What is all this? What's its purpose? I don't see it as a case against Academia. He happened to have a confrontation with a professor who was as difficult and pig-headed as he was. Does that say anything about the university as a whole? I don't think so. You need structured arguments that deal with issues on the general level. Otherwise you're only indulging in the arbitrary and anecdotal.

I had problems with three and perhaps four professors in a philosophy department that operated poorly by certain standards and yet professionally by others. I bear witness then not only to this state of affairs as an institutional possibility but to its being a permanent and universal one. That is, to an ongoing state of affairs where the high-level maintenance of truth-telling as *ideal* and the high-level maintenance of it as *industry* never quite coincide.

– Is it mere self-indulgence to set himself up as the ideal by which he measured the philosophy department? Is it the same thing as being perfect in all ways? Of course not. It's probably even antithetical to super-good behaviour. But to show this, to not pretend there's nothing troubling or troublesome about it is —

– Authentic? Admirable? The pure voice of truth-telling itself? Cancelling out all other faults and failings?

– For me it is if not for you.

- *You're too close to him to be anything but his time-honoured vaunting of his pure knightly heroic image.*
- *That he could've kept this image so long shows there is something pure, knightly, and heroic about it.*
- *And what if he were to falter? People do. For many reasons. How do you know?*
- *You're implying he's not a true hero. That he's only playing at being one.*
- *Fighting with professors isn't such a big deal, is it? You can't compare it to laying down your life for your country.*
- *Who lays down their life for their country? I don't believe in it. The most that can be said is somebody takes a chance with their life. And that's precisely what he's done.*
- *His life's not over. What if he abandons ship? Gets soft in his old age?*
- *I hope he perishes first.*
- *You're all youth and vigour, Alice. You don't know what it is to get old.*
- *It doesn't matter. It's what's happened up to now that counts. Is he supposed to make some sort of promise? Prepare the future so it won't betray the past? I think he will if he has to.*

However much I look back on my past and wonder at my boldness and, no less, however much it seems pale and paltry in comparison with what others have done, I can't help but view the future as a test or trial no longer so easy to imagine.

- *Oh, look upon me and tell me you don't know what it is.*

Of course I would like to believe I can still exalt it.

- *Oh, look upon me and tell me that's no longer true.*

So that all I have thought and said will not end up condemning it or, worse, be condemned by it.

- *Oh, look upon me and exalt it as far as death itself. Otherwise it's not a life but a joke. A mere replay of Krapp's Last Tape. Oh, you remember that, don't you? Let's hear no more of this. It's unbearable. It's old man's talk. It's to make the*

end – the miserable pathetic old man’s end – the whole truth of a life. Andrew, is it such a small thing to take on three professors? Risk alienating a fourth? Write three essays directly challenging Professor Joós’ s books?

– I don’t feel up to this.

– You don’t feel up to it. And then to go toe-to-toe with two other professors who marked his essays and gave him grades inferior to what he normally got?

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