

## 5. *European Trip*

With a romantic outlook as my spiritual mainstay, I did all I could to ensure that my trip to and from Europe (boat instead of plane) as well around it (bicycle instead of train) would surpass the adventures and experiences I had hitherto had. It was one that was carefully thought out but with no strict itinerary to prevent me from changing my plans en route. A trip that would see me largely free of encumbrances such as luggage, hotel reservations, and train or bus schedules. A trip that would *not* see me taking my culture with me in the form of package flights, group tours, and the inability to speak more than one language.

At this point I feel compelled to preempt any tendency on my part to give to my European trip more than its due. To exaggerate it or enlarge upon it in a way that would run counter to all I'm attempting to do here. That it was rich with various encounters and experiences, that it took me into broader, milder, and more fertile regions, and that it mellowed my temperament to some degree are all things I can state with confidence.

*– Oh, but what a great thing it was to be young and on the road! Despite what you're saying here, you should have gone on forever as you did then! The noblest and most uplifting time of your life!*

No, this is precisely what I don't want. The fact of the matter is I suffered many moments of letdown and dissatisfaction on the road. I certainly wasn't always happy. And even if it is true I was young, strong, and carefree, so were many others. I don't see how these factors can justify painting the trip as something extraordinary.

*– But what do you know about the extraordinary? Are only Antarctic expeditions or Safari hunts extraordinary? Or quests for Holy Grails? Or conquests of mountains, deserts, jungles, and continents? Couldn't it be something like this: a near-perfect congruence of the mental and physical? Of a person's state of mind and the state of his world?*

I can remember occasions and episodes that were far from being this happy union. Such as when I was in southern Germany and fed up with over-crowded youth hostels and bad weather. For a while I was seriously thinking of packing it in and going home. Of cutting my trip short by several months. I had to spend a week in a *Fremdenzimmerhaus* just to recuperate and get back my taste for travel.

*– What a narrow and constricted view! Of course there were such moments. A trip without them would have been a dream in the worst sense. It would have been nothing tangible. Nothing you could truly touch, taste, smell, feel. And nothing to exalt over because, in order to exalt, you also have to agonize. But what about the trip as a whole? Are you ready to say it wasn't a near perfect union of a traveller's head and heart?*

Towards the end of it, a certain lethargy and lack of enthusiasm set in. A certain feeling of disappointment. Of the trip's having turned out to be something less than what I had hoped for. It was during my second visit to Amsterdam after having spent several months touring France and Germany. I was expecting to find my Dutch friend there but, as it turned out, she was away doing her own bit of travelling. After hanging around the city for a week, I went to see Joy's parents. To tell them I was feeling restless and ready to move on. With his face clouding over, Mr. van der Lende told me his daughter would be disappointed if I left without seeing her. So I decided to stay on another week and then, the day Joy was due back in Amsterdam, I went with her parents to welcome her at the train station. As soon as she saw me, her face lit up and she breathlessly told me that finding me in Amsterdam made her feel very good. Especially since her three-week trip to France had proven to be less than a pleasant experience.

*– Nothing extraordinary about this? That her father turned out to be prophetic? That Joy was made happy by your presence? That it proved to be the very best remedy for her? A kind of palliative for what she had suffered at the hands of some insensitive people? Then what does one call all the rest of those moments of a lifetime? The ones where one is not predicting anything of significance or turning a person's thoughts from sadness to joy?*

I admit I had a good trip. I did the first part mostly on foot and the second part on a bicycle. By these two modes of travel, I had intimate contact with my surroundings. The kind that gave me the opportunity to climb mountains, swim in lakes, stay in youth hostels, board strangers right and left, and, generally speaking, extend my horizons in a multitude of ways. All of this I can safely attest to while at the same time claiming it was the natural outgrowth of my outlook before going to Europe. In other words, the continuation of a process of maturation already underway.

*– There is a time in one's life when one writes oneself better in at least one way than at any other. At twenty-four and twenty-five you weren't mature in all respects but, as a moral person, you perhaps reached your apogee.*

I don't deny I was more even-tempered in Europe than at any other time in my life. But it was the conditions and circumstances that made it so. People in general were very good to me. In every country I visited, I had the experience of a stranger taking me into their home. The first time was in Ireland. A young woman with two children in a car drove up. It was pouring rain and she wanted to know where I was headed. It turned out she had spent a year in Canada. In no time at all, I was whisked to the family home and given something to eat while my clothes dried out.

The next time was in England. Again a young woman. I had done her a favour by pumping up her bicycle tire. She lived in a small flat with her husband and four-year-old son. I spent the night in the same room as the child.

The next time also in England. An elderly woman who gave me a lift when she spotted the Canadian flag on my packsack. She too must have found me instantly trustworthy. I soon found myself eating at her table and having my wash done.

*– If your theme is the extraordinary, then do you have anything less here?*

My theme is truth-telling and the extraordinary only fits in as my preoccupation with it. As an element that perhaps accounts for a certain errancy, a certain orientation that afflicts truth-telling itself.

I'm deathly afraid of exaggeration. I think this is what afflicts truth-telling from the other side. Or, to put it most tellingly, the norm of truth-telling *is* exaggeration. As that way of going about it always with the assumption that one is close to saying – or has already said – the last word on a subject.

*– The European trip was as close as one gets to making the soul's confrontation with the ordinary symphonic. No battles did you witness but only battlefields long covered over by peace and quiet and both man's and nature's healing husbandry. No diplomatic missions or high-level conferences but only stately buildings keeping up the appearance that for centuries human beings have conducted their affairs one step below the angels. No five-star hotels, gaudy casinos, or expensive ski lodges but majestic breathtaking vistas, towering mountains, and the great moveable dome of heaven following you wherever you went.*

I was frugal and stretched my money as far as I could. Usually I stayed in youth hostels but sometimes I slept outside. Walking for a whole day didn't

bother me and, later, on the Continent, cycling hundreds of kilometres per week was routine. I ate simple fare and, while in France, drank cheap wine out of plastic bottles. I never got sick except for one time in Germany. I was eighty kilometres from Koblenz when I started to get the runs. This wasn't a pleasant experience because I had to stop many times along the way to wipe myself.

*– Take yourself to the Connemara. You had arrived at the youth hostel. It was still closed. You decided to climb the heather-covered mountain directly behind it. Although the sun was shining, the mountain was steeped in low-lying clouds. Never before had you seen such a sight! At the base of it you left your orange-coloured packsack and proceeded up the mountain. At first the going wasn't too bad. Cattle grazed on the lower slopes. But as you got higher and to that part where the sheep were, the slope became very wet and slippery. Soon the boggy ground was completely saturated. With your boots and socks wet through and through, you finally reached the low-lying clouds. From the angle of ascent, they appeared to be nothing more than very high fog. But once you were above them and standing on the rocky summit, you could peer through them like a god and survey the whole glorious landscape.*

Harsh reality was the hospitality of the youth hostel down below. Or rather lack of it. And yet it seemed it should have gone all the other way. For there I was in a very remote area and, all of a sudden, a party of three Canadians showed up at the hostel. What luck, I thought! Coming across my countrymen in this neck of the woods. Surely it was an occasion for exchanging stories, observations, criticisms, and the like. But once we had exchanged no more than a few greetings, the threesome retired to their room and showed by other signs they were enough company unto themselves.

*– But the very next day a middle-aged couple stopped for you on the road. You weren't even hitchhiking but they offered you a lift. They were very kind, well-spoken, and gracious people. Not at all like the stereotype of Americans overseas. So if taken into consideration with the rather cold treatment you received at the hands of your countrymen, you experienced two departures from what is usually expected or might be expected. The very sort of thing your thoughts lingered on. This minor play between the exceptional and the unexceptional.*

But without being able to do anything with it. I can only recount some of these departures from norms and stereotypes. I can only give proof of being

sensitive to them. But I can't raise them up to the level of a commentary thematising truth-telling.

*– Let me work on it. As the theme of hesitation itself. Of not always knowing. Of playing this into truth-telling as part of it. Of finding that so much hesitation is in the book of life and so little in the books on life. Truth-telling then as the denial of itself in these books to pose as truth. To give truth value as the solid and substantial – the unhesitating and unwavering – precisely in relation to so much else. Truth then as the relatively solid and substantial that can only be done away with in its own good time. In the meantime, it stands like the pyramids forever eroding.*

Some were pleasant surprises, some were unsettling, and some were almost a joke. Take the Irish woman I met on the ferry. How she went on about the friendliness and hospitality of the Irish people! "Mark my words," she said, "they'll open their hearts as much as their doors to you." And so on. It sounded like an advertisement. And perhaps it was. She was a businesswoman who travelled frequently. Smartly dressed and well-spoken, she seemed out of place sitting there on the rude bench with other passengers. I also found it strange to hear her disparaging the English while doing business in their country.

Freshly arrived in Ireland, I was ready to taste the exceptional friendliness and hospitality of the Irish people. After I had found out that my father was no longer in Cork but living somewhere in Dublin, I left the first city and made my way towards the second. I was only on the outskirts of Cork when I had my first taste of exceptional friendliness and hospitality. It came in the form of a motorist, fat, fiftyish, and with a bearded faun-like face, parked on the side of the road. As I passed by him, he crooked a finger at me. With a road map of Ireland spread out over the steering wheel, he asked me if I knew the route to Dublin. A strange question given there was but one route and it was clearly marked on the map! After asking a few more questions, he offered me a lift.

Vincent Child, as he called himself, proved to be a very loquacious gentleman. A bit too loquacious for his own good insofar as, after only fifteen or twenty minutes, I realized he was familiar with the route we were on. Along with pointing out various landmarks, he told me he was a French teacher from Bangor, Northern Ireland. He was on a holiday trip in the Republic. As we drove along, he had the habit of clapping me on the knee to express his exceptional friendliness and hospitality. A couple of hours went by like this before we stopped for lunch. With the look of a connoisseur, he

described to me the virtues of authentic Irish stew. But after trying several places and having no luck in finding any, we both settled for something more common or at least presumably so, a roast chicken dinner. After we had finished our meal and returned to the car, he asked me if I would like to take over the wheel. Though I had never driven a car with a right-hand drive, I accepted the challenge. For a half-hour or so Vincent Child chattered away as before while I focussed all my attention on the road. Not only was it very narrow and windy, but every so often huge lorries would suddenly appear from behind a blind curve and brush past me. Then came the moment I realized the atmosphere had changed. Not only did Vincent Child lapse into a profound silence but I detected some movement coming from his abdominal region. At first I thought it was simply his belly fat jostling. But then a quick glance revealed he had his right arm buried up to the elbow in one of his pockets. From underneath his very loose pants in one spot, there was a lot of activity. My first reaction was anger but then, all of a sudden, he renewed his amiable chatter as if somebody had pulled a switch. It was enough to calm me down, make me assess the situation, and finally decide to pretend I hadn't noticed anything.

It seemed that Vincent Child was as reluctant to part with me as I was anxious to get clear of him. Although he wanted to drive me to the very door of my destination, I insisted upon being dropped off in the centre of Dublin. While I pulled out my packsack from the backseat of the car, he waddled over to my side and started to write down his address and phone number on a piece of paper. After he had given it to me, he shook my hand vigorously and bid me come visit him. By the way he conducted himself, so warm and friendly and almost, as it seemed, with a tear in his eye, an onlooker might have thought he was taking leave of his best friend.

*– I want to take the high road and you want to take the low road of your trip. I want to see it consolidating you as a person who would be able to stand firm and unshaken for the rest of his life. You want to see it as a mere extension and outgrowth of what you were before. In Europe you found the balance between rounding off certain corners and keeping others sharp. An errancy of principle rather than merely a principle of errancy. A way to respect the difference of others while hallowing the as yet undefined genius residing in yourself.*

Like others who distrust a genius in name only, so do I this form of solace and comfort for having fallen short. It is better to recall that, during my time in Europe, no poetry was written and, from all my experiences there, no story drawn. The best I could do was, partway through my trip, take a

month or so off to write down what had thus far befallen me. It was in the dead of winter and I was in the wonderful city of York. I had found lodging in a bed and breakfast place and, in an unheated room with a rented typewriter, I began to tell the story of my trip from the day I had set out from Winnipeg.

It was an attempt to develop a prose style that agreed with me and, as I recall, this was no easy task. Words seemed to get in the way of writing as much as they helped it. Or else they kept themselves scarce so as not to help it. The vision I had of the writer pounding out his lines one after another was so far removed from what I was doing that I couldn't help but feel deficient. It was only as a war between my frustration and my stubbornness that I eventually got down a few dozen pages of script. I remember thinking at the time – oh, what a singular thought! – that it was taking me as long to record my experiences as to live them.

*– Who can spell out the proper curriculum and way of proceeding for every single devotion? Who knows what twists and turns may lie in the apprenticeship of a person bent on a project he hardly knows? That still has to be worked out? That in fact still needs to be discovered or invented? To think you wasted your time because these writings were never completed and even lost years later is to think all worthwhile activity must quickly yield a finished product. But if you could see that the writing down of your trip as lived experience was the re-writing of it on paper and if, furthermore, you could see that this rewriting etched it ever more deeply in your mind, then you wouldn't be dismissive of these seemingly ragtag efforts that didn't hit the bull's eye of a publishable manuscript.*

I suppose I'm benefiting now from what I did then. Just as I have benefited or at least my memory has benefited from having related all my adventures to the Lohre family while working with them. Principally there was Gerd and Roman and Roman's two sons, Ralf and Frank. Our coffee and lunch breaks were largely spent in a little trailer that, besides having benches, served for storing and transporting equipment. It was in this humble place that, along with so much other enjoyable talk, my adventures in Europe were heard and appreciated. The fact that the Lohre brothers were from Europe and had their own stories to tell gave these sessions the flavour of a long followup study.

*– Lucky you! To have this continuity! This lifelong apprenticeship!*

Some would say too long. Too mixed and scrambled in its elements to be

truly an apprenticeship.

*– Let others say what they will. They speak from their own corner which might be their own prejudice.*

One can't ignore the world and the world's opinion. Already I have been called a solipsist.

*– Yes, but by somebody who didn't even know what the word means. What she meant to say was that you lived your life too much in isolation. She meant – well, we know very well what she meant. The only way she could see you succeeding as the author of a book on truthtelling was by getting on at a university.*

She saw my errancy only as a flight that had to be corrected or straightened out. In her mind, the only literary eggs I would ever hatch would have to be laid in the great bourgeois nest of Academia.

*– Journal articles. Perhaps a book, if you were lucky. A standard scholarly work of some sort or other. Do you think, if you had ever followed her advice, you would have the time, the energy, and, above all, the inclination to write on truthtelling?*

With all the duties and responsibilities of a university professor, I would have lost track of my truest self. I would have been forced to create a different or even contrary one. I would have had to assimilate so much of the conventional that little room would have been left over for an intellectual, emotional, and imaginative flight. For trying to see this world from as high up as possible.

*– And this doesn't mean to see it as the astronaut or scientist sees it. Unless they were willing to make their own seeing part of this world.*

From where God is, I suppose. This terrible presumption of the truthteller. What can it possibly have to do with standing on a mountaintop in the Connemara or flagellating myself for my lack of creativity?

*– It can only be if the high is in the low and the low in the high. Eternity in the moment and the moment in eternity.*

The mystical moment. It's always plagued truthtelling. Plato himself shows this. When he talks about the Good as that higher sun, he gives us a second



mystery behind the one that already is.

*– It was in Amsterdam you had your own experience. It was in August and you were at the tail end of your trip. At a time when you were feeling down, as you have already mentioned. You were staying at a Christian Youth Hostel and wondering if it was worthwhile to hang around until Joy returned. As the latest of a number of interesting but eccentric types you came across in Europe, there was this German drug dealer in the hostel. Though having resided in Amsterdam for several years, he seemed to have no fixed address. You wondered why this should be given that, as a drug dealer in that city, he shouldn't have been in too much danger of a bust. In any event, he was an agreeable fellow and you spent some time with him. He smoked up regularly himself and, on certain occasions, he would stand and stare at a spot where a minute or two before something had taken place. This gave the impression that his reflexes and powers of perception had been retarded.*

*One morning he asked you if you wanted to toke up with him. It was a perfect day and you were sitting on a bench outside the hostel with a vista only Europe and, more particularly, Amsterdam can offer. A tree-lined street stretched out before you with cobblestone walks, low sixteenth-century buildings bunched together, and, straight down the middle, a canal, half-shaded and half-sunlit, with numerous boats sitting motionless on either side.*

*The hashish, he said, was from Cambodia and very potent. He mixed it with some tobacco and then rolled two large joints. It had been a long time since you had last touched the stuff but, feeling the desire to get a lift and be at one with the summer day, you sucked greedily on the reefer and held the smoke down in your lungs for the better part of a minute.*

*You'll remember that, by the time you finished your second toke, you were feeling sick. You couldn't finish the joint. You gave it back to the pusher. You were feeling so rotten you finally got up and, wanting to be alone, went back into the hostel. You looked for somewhere to sit down. The best place seemed to be the little courtyard that was part of the hostel. So you entered it and sat down in a lawn chair. You felt yourself completely drained of strength. You sat there for a long time. Your chin was sunk on your chest and your arms dangled loosely at your sides. It seemed as if they had been suddenly turned to lead. In fact, your whole body was sunk in your chair like a dead weight. It was as if the Earth's gravitational pull had suddenly increased to equal Saturn's or Jupiter's.*

*In the sunlit courtyard was a large square-shaped flower box. There were no flowers in it but, as your nausea lifted and you felt strong enough to raise your head, you observed the sparrows that were frequently lighting on the concrete ledge. For a while you found it very pleasant, almost a delicious feeling, to watch them hop about, ruffle their feathers, peck significantly at invisible objects, and then dart off like heaven-sent messengers. After a while, it was also a pleasure to look around and take in the courtyard. It was enclosed on all sides by very old buildings that rose some twenty or thirty feet. The peaks of the roofs cut out a square patch of blue sky across which, like the remnants of a scattered fleet, two or three clouds sailed majestically.*

*Further overhead and towards the centre of the inverted pool was the brilliant eye of heaven. What was the prodigy that suddenly made you lift up your eye to it and feel as if you had entered the universe? It was one of those white-robed guardians of the lower heavens that allowed it to come to pass. One of those white billowy clouds, earthly representatives of the angelic, that, moving like a giant solitary ice flow in the sky, caught your attention. Slowly it drifted towards the sun and then, catching fire, mediated its glory to your eye. For with this conjuncture of the sun, the cloud, the perceiving eye, and the inner eye came your overwhelming sense of the bond, the beauty, and the radiance inherent in all things.*

I remember a solitary cloud that briefly veiled the sun in the most beautiful way. I remember looking up and watching this spectacle as if I had never seen the like before.

*– The extraordinary is in the ordinary and the ordinary in the extraordinary. If your trip was more of the first than the second, it was less the extraordinary of a different degree than a different viewing.*

The extraordinary thing for me about this experience was that, as much as it may have been a *unio mystica*, it was also Cartesian.

*– You were enraptured! A straight line was drawn between you and the source of life. Like Zarathustra, you had this prayer: "Oh great star, what would your happiness be if you had not those for whom you shine?"*

It was getting towards noon. All things tend to become clear and distinct then. I thought to myself: "I'm this thinking thing. A thing that thinks. However momentary my existence, it can't be denied that I am. That right now I see, hear, taste, touch, smell. I'm in this courtyard. I'm under this

sun. I'm having these thoughts. I'm as much a part of all this as the sun and sky and cloud. I'll remain this eternal fact no matter what happens. I'll always have been at this moment."

*– The thinking thing you are, usually taken so much for granted, suddenly turned into a marvel. But only in relation to a universe bestowing upon you your consciousness so you might marvel both at it and its source.*

I remember asking: "Oh, why can't it be like this forever? Why? Why? Why?" And then, even while I was still enraptured, the answer came: "Because you're not just *that*. You're also thinking, planning, acting, doing. Like everyone else, you have to work. You have to struggle. You have to compete. You have to fight. . . . This can't go on. Otherwise you would have to sit here forever and do nothing more than contemplate a sunlit courtyard, a blue sky overhead, and a cloud that grows radiant as it crosses the sun."

*– Never before had you experienced such a loss of ego. Do you remember saying: "Oh, what a fool I've been! Chasing around after an illusory happiness when it was always here before me!"*

That's the way I felt then. It didn't last very long. I went back to being a fool. I wrote that stupid letter full of frank sexual talk. I had just finished reading some crazy hyped-up book on sex therapy. Somehow that made me think I could be equally candid with her about my sexual desires.

*– Flimflam!*

My romantic dreams always torn to ratshit!

*– Your romantic dreams, if ever fulfilled, would have seen you fucking your brains out with a harem of women from here to eternity!*

Ah-hah! I see for once you're not playing the romantic!

*– I'm the most romantic part of you. Transcending all ugly death. Including the ugly death of a relationship....You can't say you loved her. You only had sex with her. And then you wanted more sex. For God's sake, if you loved her or anyone like her, you would have settled down somewhere and cut me out! Cut me away from you! The only muse you've ever had!*

I know you're right and yet I hate to think it had to be this way. There was those delicious moments in Paris with Karen and Barbara. The Two German

students I met at the youth hostel. They were both in their early twenties and spoke nearly perfect English. Along with this guy from Switzerland who was also at the hostel, we spent quite a bit of time together. I remember we went to the Louvre, the Champs d'Élysées, Montmartre, Place Pigale, and a few other places. But what really stands out was that visit to the Eiffel Tower. The guy from Switzerland wasn't with us because Barbara had grown a bit tired of him. Although he was a decent enough fellow, he paid her somewhat more attention than she cared to receive from him. In any event, she and Karen were with me and we were at the Eiffel Tower and, while they decided to stay below (possibly to economize), I bought myself a ticket to go halfway up the tower. So I went up and, when I got to the platform, I looked down and waved at them. And as soon they saw me, they waved right back. Then I left the platform, climbed down the tower, and joined them at the base. We were still under that giant metal quadruped when they both decided to take me by the arm. I was very pleased by this gesture and, as we strolled down the boulevard, I felt more successful as a lover than I had ever felt before.

*– To go towards where it hurts the most or feels the best is often to go towards the truth. This is where the poet excels the most fastidious teller of general or objective truths. Precisely in his determination that the nature of truth is or must be known beforehand, the latter tells us a good deal about it that is useful but ultimately misses the mark. It gives us what we need to live and know as human beings. But it touches neither the contradictory nature of ourselves nor the contradictory nature of itself in its thousand and one tellings.*

Perhaps it is time to move on from Europe. Intellectually speaking, I fluttered around it like a butterfly. Perhaps I *am* such a butterfly. I didn't take my first university course till I was twenty-five. It was an English course on twentieth century literature. When I was in England and Ireland, I would have benefited from it. I think, for example, of the fellow I chatted with on the ferry. He asked me if I had ever read Yeats. It would have been nice to show I was familiar with Ireland's greatest poet rather than being embarrassed because I didn't know anything about him.

*– It always seems some project or work can be touched up in this or that way. The fellow on the ferry who dropped Yeats' name into the conversation might have known him well or not at all. If the latter, you would have embarrassed him if, as is your wont, you went on at length about a subject you were familiar with.*

Turning and turning upon the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

*Rather why not think of it the other way? That Europe instilled in you the desire to return to it by other means. And not only Europe in the literal sense but also in the sense of a wide-open theatre full of surprises and adventures.*

That's to keep with the butterfly motif. There was this sort of half-intoxication that stayed with me later and could never be shaken off. An artistic freedom I thought I could bring to everything. In such a way that, when I was working with the Lohres and taking one or two courses at university and struggling to be a playwright, I fluttered about many different intellectual flowers. Here and there I would land and, if all was to my liking, I would stay for a while. But if I landed somewhere that, however nourishing it seemed to others, disagreed with me in the least way, why then I would soon fly off and look for another flower.

*– I don't want to leave the University of Europe so quickly. I don't want you to understate just as you don't want to overstate its importance. I know there are a thousand and one things that can't be talked about without becoming merely anecdotal. Without losing the thrust of your argument as both performative and constative act. As revelation of the subject of yourself bearing on the subject of truth-telling. But along with those thousand and one things that shouldn't be mentioned, there must at least be a few dozen or so that should. That speak of human nature or how the world goes and therefore cannot be irrelevant to the subject.*

The subject is still in danger of getting overloaded with the insignificant. After all, what does it matter if I visited such and such cathedral or took in such and such museum? Or if I stayed in such and such youth hostel or traversed such and such river or lake or moor or mountain?

*– Yes, what does it matter if you found a wallet with a lot of money in it and promptly returned it? Or what does it matter if you found your father living in a filthy little room and not only visited him at the beginning of your trip but also at the end of it?*

What does it matter if I ate cheaply wherever I went? Or what does it matter if I slept outside on a number of occasions?

*– What does it matter if you met many memorable people, one of whom died even before you finished your trip? Or what does it matter if Joy (the friend of this person) was a lesbian who concealed the fact from you? Who probably was testing you out when she told you her sister was gay?*

What does it matter if I cycled thousands of kilometres? Or went by ship and by rail over thousands of others?

*– What does it matter if you stole a fork in a youth hostel and then, when confronted by the woman in charge, at first denied the theft and then admitted it? What does it matter if you came to the aid of a man who collapsed on the street? What does it matter if you became friends with members of a religious colony whose beliefs you didn't share? What does it matter if you saw your father fraternizing with social outcasts and didn't despise him for it? What does it matter if you held your temper in check when a newspaper vendor was rude to you? What does it matter? What does it matter? What does it matter? So you could go on with these "what does it matters?" and if they don't prove your essential honesty, openness, and good will, then they prove nothing.*

But am I in need of proving this to myself? For the sake of what? An uncertainty in this area? For the sake of clearing it away? Better then to be suspicious and think I'm trying to conjure away all those times I didn't come to the rescue of a person or return a stolen thing or refrain from bigotry and prejudice. For surely there were such times easily glossed over and forgotten.

*– Name one time you played the bigot in Europe.*

If not in Europe, then sometime later.

*– Let "later" deal with itself later. Europe is where you're now being called to account.*

I met a family of gypsies in County Mayo. It was the same day I got picked up by the woman who had lived in Canada and had two kids in the car. It was pouring rain and I was walking down a lonely Irish road. Nothing but bare fields and farmland on either side. Until I spotted this odd-looking makeshift tent. Smoke was issuing from a hole at the top but, as I passed by, I saw no one. After having gone a bit further, I heard a shout from behind. I turned around and saw a man kneeling under a little canopy at the entrance. He waved and called out: "Would you mind comin' over here for a

minute?" So I walked over and, to my great surprise, a horde of children suddenly rushed out of the tent. They quickly surrounded me and began reaching into my pockets. "Got a copper, mister? Got a copper?" The man didn't make any effort to hold them back. Instead he proudly informed me there were ten of them. Ten dishevelled but healthy-looking boys and girls (how many boys and how many girls I'm not sure) with reddish hair and freckles across their noses. Inside the tent was a young woman (the man himself was about thirty) kneeling before a huge cauldron. She was busy stirring a thick gruel. The man said: "We're makin' porridge. Would you like some?" Feeling a bit intimidated by the primitive conditions and the swarm of importuning children, I politely declined. Then, after having asked me where I was from, he started looking me over from head to foot. "Where did you get a hat like that? Oh, I'd love to have a hat like that! And that cape! Now there's a good thing to have in the rain! And those boots! Whooh-h-h! That's a bloody good pair of boots you've got on your feet!" And so on until he finally got to the point of all these flattering observations. But when I checked my wallet and discovered that I only had five-pound notes in it, I told him I was sorry but I wasn't able to give him what he wanted. Quick as a wink he changed the transaction from a grant to a loan and swore that, if I gave him a fiver, he would pay me back the very next time he saw me.

A few hours later, when I was comfortably ensconced in a grand old house and getting my clothes dried, I mentioned having run into that poor but remarkable family. My hostess's mother-in-law, a lively old woman of eighty-four, promptly informed me that the tinkers, the Irish gypsies, were good-for-nothings who stole whatever they could. The government had tried to reform their vagabond ways, she said, but it was all to no avail.

*- Do you remember that hostel in Poitiers? The young woman there who criticized the French for their rudeness and unhelpfulness? You told her to imagine herself a Frenchwoman going to America and speaking nothing but French. "What kind of reaction do you think you'd get?" you asked her.*

*And how about those two Canadian rednecks you met in Carlisle? Don't you remember feeling stricken by the thought they were representing Canada overseas?*

*And do you remember that German youth in Koblenz who tried to apologize to you for the Second World War? Talk about being stricken! Talk about collective guilt!*

*And how about that middle-aged man in the Eiffel Region? The one who*

*surprised you with the only three words he knew in English? It's amazing to think how much he conveyed to you with those three words.*

But I can't be certain my interpretation accorded with the facts.

*– Facts! Is that what's required here? Rather aren't we dealing with what could have happened? If it didn't happen to him, then to someone else.*

Something of the sort did in fact happen to Gerd. He was only seventeen when he was taken prisoner. He ended up in Scotland along with everyone else on board his ship. As a way to humiliate them, I suppose, they were herded through the streets of Edinburgh. Everybody was shouting, swearing, and spitting at them.

*– And you have no reason to disbelieve his account. A man whom you knew and respected for over sixteen years.*

I have no reason to disbelieve a word of what he told me. Especially since he admitted that, on the whole, he was treated well. The prison conditions were tolerable and later, when he was put on a farm as the last stage of his imprisonment, he was given a fair bit of liberty.

There was this story he told us. It's rather funny and I don't know if it serves any purpose other than to show the kind of man Gerd was. It happened just before his ship was captured. Morale on board was low. Everyone knew the war was lost. So when they got trapped in a Norwegian fiord by a British destroyer, Gerd and the rest of the crew were more relieved than alarmed by the turn of events. It was at this point – that is, just after there had been an official surrender and they were waiting for the ship to be taken over – Gerd ran into the captain on deck. By force of habit, he gave him the Nazi salute and shouted: *"Heil, Hitler!"* The captain looked at him like he was the worst kind of practical joker and said: *"Nicht jetzt, du Idiot!"*

But getting back to my own story. I met this guy in a pub in some little picturesque town I have forgotten the name of. I was taking a break before one of those usual ascents to the highest point in town where they always put the youth hostel. A grizzled character came up to me while I was at the bar scanning the price list. He said something to me in German I didn't understand. When I responded with my usual: *"Es tut mir leid. Ich verstehe nicht,"* he glared at me fiercely. *"Ein Engländer?"* he asked. *"Nein, ich bin ein Kanadier,"* I answered. Suddenly his expression changed, his face lit up, and he sighed blissfully: *"Ah, Kanada!"* I soon found out he had family living



here. But I don't remember the rest of our conversation because, besides buying me drinks and being extremely friendly, he got very drunk. So it was difficult to make out what he was saying.

– *But you remember those three words.*

Oh, how could I forget them! They came out of his rambling and drunken stupor just before I parted company with him and headed for the youth hostel. If I'm right in my interpretation, they explain why he looked so fiercely at me when he asked if I was English.

– *And perhaps he experienced what Gerd experienced only several degrees worse.*

That's the story I never got from him. I only got these three words: *Fucking Nazi Pigs!* But they already tell a story, don't they?

– *A very large story.*

Who cares about German soldiers that were abused by the Allies. That's at least part of it.

– *And the other?*

That all neat divisions between the good on one side and the bad on the other are bogus.

– *I feel we're coming together. There's this underlying moral dimension to your trip.*

I suspect he was taken prisoner by the English. He must have heard those words over and over.

– *What other explanation can there be?*

A few months later, after touring France, I visited Dachau and the Olympic Stadium where the Israeli athletes were killed. The two places are not very far apart.

– *Perhaps in more ways than one.*

I cycled around a good part of Bavaria. It was so beautiful. It was hard to

believe it once was fertile ground for so much grotesque myth-making.

*– Yes, there’s this tendency to imagine beautiful surroundings producing only beautiful people.*

But that’s close to what they imagined, isn’t it? That they were the superior race. Only, for some reason, it had to become doctrine. As if they didn’t quite believe it and so needed reasons and arguments to bolster their belief. However much we rule out these reasons and arguments today as such, this is what they essentially were. And this is what formed their ugly doctrine.

*– My thoughts are becoming troubled. To talk about doctrine always sounds like more doctrine. Reasons and arguments headed off in yet another direction. I don’t enjoy this closeness, this consensus, this being too reasonable anymore than you relish overstating or exaggerating yourself. A state of mind, a state of being that’s free and open – what do I care about the rest? Do I care that six million Jews died more than I care about this freedom? This openness?*

*I’m with the stars and the sun and the sky where billions upon billions have already died. I’m with the pair of eyes that communes with them, with the heart that twinges every so often at the thought of them, and with the head that takes it all in and crowns itself lord of all. I’m with the rest of humanity insofar as all hypocrisy is cut out. I’m with the pure moment of truth-telling each has within himself even if he doesn’t know or care about it.*

*Pride and fullness are my principal qualities even when I’m taking into consideration the pathetic state of myself. I always find a way to see from above so as to be above my paltry condition. To find a lodging that is properly not it but some vast and open domain. Some kingdom of the ego that is no more my doing, no more my ego (or yours), than the stars and the sun and the sky. And there I wander back and forth and to and fro like the devil in Job. For I know no height, no distance, no domain, no kingdom that isn’t bound up with falling back into the world.*

While I’m conscious of this part of myself, it is obviously not my most social self. For me to talk about something like the Holocaust – something so evil and so terrible – is to say, first of all, that, when I approach this subject, I walk upon eggshells. So massive was the errancy of those times and so fresh the wound even today that any move to implicate it in normality and the everyday is viewed as the contrary of the “Never again!” Of the belief it was somehow a singular event and qualitatively different from all other

atrocities.

Thus I protect myself. I want it to be known that I'm not an insensitive reader of these events. Even to myself. Is this hypocrisy? Is this merely a ritual chant? Is this merely curiosity enlarged to the moral sphere? Forced up there, as it were?

I have divided myself in two because there is this "yes" and this "no" to the question. Just as there is this question of whether or not my trip around Europe was extraordinary.

I wanted the freedom to equivocate because I think equivocation the most rightful route to follow. Here nothing is doctrine or at least trying to be doctrine but merely revelation and disclosure. Thus I take it to be what is already the state of affairs and not what should be. This "should be" is what crosses out this state of affairs a thousand and one times. It is where we all are as active human beings getting on in the world.

*– But you wish to force a union where there never was one. You can't separate me from you because I never was you. No less than your heartbeat am I joined to your thoughts but no less am I not them. I'm speaking through you right now but I have no voice you can properly hear. I reach towards you from where you came and where you're going. The stars, the sun, and the sky.*

Is this what I picked up in Europe? Were these some of my thoughts? Or am I simply reading back into that episode of my life a later development?

Certainly nothing there blocked me off from this development. A development that I take to be, if not morally superior to the one of that period, then at least in line with it. To be open and not closed off doesn't sound like much unless the subject is truth-telling. It is not something to live by unless it were divided, as is commonly the case, into the truth on one side and the telling of it on the other. It is not something to live by unless one were bent on confounding this division by exposing it to be less than truthful.

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