

54. To the Top of the Mountain

– How long are we going to go on with this sort of thing? Till I'm worn out? Till I'm rhapsodizing about it like she is? As far as I can tell, I'm here for no other reason than to provide you with a good conscience. And now that she's out for a bit, let me remind you that, while sympathetic to you in some respects, I'm opposed to this sort of pompous, exuberant, rhetorical...

Self-indulgent —

– ...style calling itself philosophy.

I have some qualms about it myself.

– It's in bad taste. People resent being psychologically pressured into adopting a high opinion of anything but themselves.

I realize that without a measure of sympathy I'm going to be dismissed.

– Alice, where were you?

– He needs no sympathy because his song is a symphony! Long after others have made their seemingly more resplendent runs, his work will draw together so many minds that it's hardly imaginable today.

– Alice, I happen to be living in today and this is all very wearisome.

– You're one of those who can't go up to the top of the mountain. You lose heart halfway and then want to go back to the valley.

– And what is up at the top of the mountain and what's so wrong with the valley? As far as I can recall – and I remember this specifically from Ibsen's Brand – there's nothing up there but death.

– There's also death in the valley.

– Delayed, retarded death. Ugly non-romantic unattractive death. Yes, I grant you that. I suppose we need mountain climbers for no other reason than to beautify it. But for the vast majority of us who climb no higher than our beds at the final call, well, who's to say what inner Himalayas we — oh, what's the use? Is youth in any position to do better than secretly admire itself and detest those who've let themselves grow old?

Did Nietzsche die on a mountaintop at age forty-forty or in bed at age fifty-

five? Spiritually speaking, I don't think there can be any doubt. I myself am now already at the age he was when he died in bed. Vigorous and vital enough, to be sure. Yet I know full well that desire and dread stand like twin sentinels on some slope, some abrupt falling off that I can only anticipate.

- *Enough of this! Please get back to Concordia!*
- *Alice, I'm wasted.*
- *You're committed. You can't leave.*
- *I feel I've worn out my welcome. It's time for me to return to the soft life of the valley.*
- *Who's to climb with us all the way up to the top of the mountain?*
- *Future generations, Alice, I don't know. Look, it's just that you can't change old heads.*
- *Is your head so old? Is it so much older than his?*
- *Alice —*
- *You've done wonderful things so far. You've kept up a running criticism that's been very beneficial.*
- *It's been simply a backdrop to whatever he has to say.*
- *You've made your own contribution.*
- *I'm tired of listening to myself.*
- *Let me recite these lines to you. "When, in setting down its burden on occasion, philosophy raises its eyes to the lofty ascent before it with its sheer precipices and craggy heights, when it anguishes deeply over its forbidding allure, its most remote, inaccessible regions, and when it ponders chillingly..."*
- *I've heard all this.*
- *...how many great-souled ones tried in vain, mistaking one or other of its cloud-capped peaks for the highest of summits, the heaven of a hard-*

earned, all-seeing human brilliance . . .” You dream of retiring and travelling around Ireland. But you know very well that your home is here. No vision of the blessed isles can be so ultimately rewarding as finding out what you might’ve been or rather what you could be with us.

I’m reluctant to draw out this phase of fighting toe-to-toe with professors. I know that it took up a tremendous amount of my time and energy and that, had it continued, it would have led to my abandoning graduate studies.

- *What’re you trying to make of me?*
- *A hero.*
- *At age sixty-three, being nothing more than an assistant professor all my life, I’m suddenly to become a hero?*
- *You will climb the tower, Mr. Solness. I can see you up there already.*
- *Climb the — how did you know?*
- *I will see you up the tower. And then I’ll shout, “Hurrah for Mr. Solness!”*

At the same time I don’t want to pass over how, in retrospect, it seems to have gone very deep with me. It is not without imagining someone crying “Hurrah for Mr. Hunter!” that I see myself having driven the nail of my dissidence and discontent deep into the wood of philosophical discourse.

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