

55. Driving the Nail of Dissidence and Discontent Deep into the Wood of Philosophical Discourse

- *Translate.*
- *I think he means principally his M. A. thesis.*
- *I suppose he thinks it's brilliant.*
- *One of the members of his committee seemed to think so.*
- *What's it about?*
- *Polemics. The debate surrounding the works of Michel Foucault.*
- *What's different about it?*
- *He didn't so much take up sides as examine the nature of the debate itself.*

Oh, this business of holding in high esteem before anyone else and apart from anyone else your own work! No matter how long this situation lasts, no matter what the reasons behind it are, you never lose the fear that such self-esteem is based on self-delusion.

- *I don't like it when he talks like this.*

But how else could one still be flexible, open, and in touch with oneself? Not even if the whole world vaunted one's work could one be absolutely sure of it.

- *I suppose he's dreaming of some sort of inverse return. As much as his work is ignored today, it will be revered tomorrow.*

Happy thought. To go to your grave and only be recognized later as having stood head and shoulders above those who ignored you.

- *I see I'm going to have to take the lead here. I shall make my report to you, Andrew. First of all, he didn't get kicked out of the university. He fought three professors and still remained academically on his feet. What's more, he stuck to his guns every step of the way and never once made a move that, as a matter of conscience, he thought was a wrong one.*

– Bravo! I'm not being sarcastic. I just think he should give the university a bit of credit.

– He has. Professor Clarke, amongst others, befriended him. Alright, let's move on. He wrote some interesting stuff even before his thesis.

– Who found it interesting? And how much of it has been published?

– Let's just say some people found it interesting. And as for publishing, that's no criterion for judging anything to be great.

– How did you get to be such an expert?

– Oh, let's not waste time. Who archives journal articles? They're needed as much as anything else but they're satellite things around texts that, like Nietzsche's, might've been scorned at one time. Alright, let's move on. All the courses he took after the ones with Joós and Shamus show that he didn't bend an inch in putting the industry, the truth-industry I mean, into question. Now it would be very tiresome to bring into view each and every sign of the indomitable nature of this man but let me just give as one example the epigraph he used for a paper on Wittgenstein (which by the way was written, like the Merleau-Ponty paper, in a highly unconventional style). It was taken from some commentator but he nonetheless thought it captured the spirit, along with some other quotes he used as epigraphs, of how he was approaching the subject.

Naturally Wittgenstein had a great horror of "professorial" philosophy by philosophers: people having to turn out lectures when they knew in their own heart that they had nothing of value to say. It is with good reason that he constantly advised his students not to become professional philosophers.

And so on. I mean, I could cite all sorts of instances, show all sorts of signs that he was always pushing ahead with his ideal and never backing off from it. It's the performative rather than the constative thing which of course anyone can take issue with and say "You're wrong here" or "You're wrong there" and have a good conscience about it because, in truth, nothing can be said that doesn't invite something else being said for or against it.

– May I say something against your way of proceeding, Miss Motormouth? I can't help but admire your vigour, your vitality, your exemplary devotion to the Cause, your way of filling in for him so he can rest in the background,

modest-like, while studying his nails. Your pugnacious style and your good clean zest for partisanship that doesn't make the adversary feel in the least belittled. But after having said all this, I can't help but feel that, philosophically if not psychologically and spiritually speaking, I've been reduced to a zero. It seems that it's been ruled in advance by the forces that be – I think they come by the name of A - L - I - C - E – that professors of philosophy aren't worth their salt and should humbly thank those that remind them of it.

– Has it come to this, Andrew? Do you think I have such a low opinion of you? Of course not. But in order to show how he drives the nail of his dissidence and discontent deep into the wood of philosophical discourse –

– I must be his whipping boy.

– You must be, in a manner of speaking, both his nail and his wood.

– Putty in your hands, you mean. Wood-filler. I'm deprived of my main strength which is to be part of the institution and turn my back on all this.

– Oh, this massive turning of the back! This collective shrug and "Let's get on with more important things." Tell me, Andrew, if the institution is right in doing this, is it still not right not to do it? And not to do it precisely in the name of truth-telling?

– How did you manage to get to be such a Jesuit? My God, this shows how trumped-up this game is because no normal twenty-three-year-old by the name of Alice or any other name would be so disposed as to think she could give philosophy lessons to her professor.

– Oh, so it's what's normal that should – oh, forget this! You know very well I'm not normal. Normality is at issue because, well, it's not everything and yet it purports to be everything and so...

– I suspect this is just another argument...

– ...in the name of truth-telling...

– ...to get me on your wavelength...

– ...there is a protest that should always be articulated.

– ...and essentially be the opponent of everything I've been up to now.

The day that normality goes over to the other side, wholly and completely, is the day that both sides dissolve.

– Sometimes he's not very helpful.

– But I see your point. I'm not dismissing it. It's just that I'm not constituted to be the rabid defender of it.

– Oh, Andrew, in that "not dismissing" and "not defending" is where all your goodness lies. In any event, I'm starting to have a bad conscience about keeping you here. I'm starting to feel I've been employing all sorts of nasty tricks to make you a partisan like I am.

It's a delicate operation *not* to make a partisan out of anything or anyone we have a good deal of control over.

– Your control over me is more than a little discomfoting, Alice. Nonetheless it's not without its charm and piquancy. I've a book-lined room in my house that I keep to most of the time and, like a gay old bachelor not much different from your hero, find some solitary pleasure. This is where I would go now if you hadn't transformed this normally dull university office into the most amazing laboratory a philosopher is ever likely to find.

I have the feeling that some of Nietzsche's truest and most enduring friends were among the group of cultivated people that, with the Zarathustra mask, he disparaged.

– Oh, Andrew, Andrew!

– Enough! You'll soon have me with women's weapons, water-drops, staining my man's cheeks. Oh, there's the role I should've played! "Darkness and devils! Saddle my horses!" Don't you think, if I had a beard and long white hair, I'd look wild and imperious enough to play the role of Lear?

– You'd play it to perfection and nobody would even know you were a university prof.

– That would be something!

- *Oh, you could play so many parts. Willie Loman in The Death of a Salesman.*
- *I suppose I could.*
- *Ned Bartley’s father in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.*
- *I don’t know that one.*
- *Duncan in Macbeth.*
- *Alright, you’ve convinced me.*
- *A most engaging professor who’s near retirement and who’s so generous and open-minded that he puts up with all the presumptions and self-confidence of an upstart undergraduate.*
- *Hmm.*
- *And who thinks of himself as a bit of a cowardly lion but is in fact full of zest and courage.*
- *A demanding part. It would require study.*
- *You are so good, Andrew. Now let me see. I think I have all the documents here.*
- *What documents? What’re you doing?*
- *Okay, here’s his M. A. thesis. Here’s his doctoral one. Here are numerous essays, notes, letters, poems. And here is even the beginning of his work on On Truthtelling.*
- *What are we supposed to do with all this?*
- *Examine it, Andrew. Find out exactly how he drives the nail of his dissidence and discontent deep into the wood of philosophical discourse.*
- *Are you joking?*
- *It seems like a Herculean task, I know, but —*

- *Yes, something like cleaning out the Augean stables.*
- *Here are his two theses.*
- *They are the only two texts that have a respectable appearance.*
- *After thirty years of philosophizing it comes down to judging a book by its cover?*
- *I see nothing much more than a collection of old essays, notes, correspondence. Alice, put it back in a box and let it sleep for thirty years.*
- *I know you're just playing hard-to-get. I know you're just dying to dig into this archive.*
- *Oh, yes! I'm looking at Gadamer's old papers. It's disordered, motley, heterogeneous.*
- *Stained, coloured, creased.*
- *Ill-taken care of, to say the least.*
- *But all intact and still very much a collection of papers. Andrew, it's our job to put some order into it.*
- *Is this a scene out of Hedda Gabler? Am I to play the role of George Tesman to your Thea? Are we to treat all this as if they were the notes of Eilert Lovborg?*
- *What a lovely way to put it!*
- *Alice, these two theses are complete philosophical works. If they're worth anything, they should go out to the world as they are.*
- *But they're incomplete, in a manner of speaking. They're cold, they're uncontextualized, they're philosophical.*
- *They're what?*
- *From the point of view of On Truth-telling, they are. Oh, Andrew, they're different unconventional things but they're still that pose of sitting god-like on some mountaintop while not being so god-like, so truly god-like, as to*

see all around and through this pose.

– This god-like above god-like pose sounds like another pose.

– Perhaps it is. Perhaps this going up a mountain is always as much a pretend-achievement as an achievement.

– And for that you're willing to risk life and limb?

– Maybe that's another half-truth because we all die anyway. Andrew, you know I'm not normal. I'm glued to his thought as if I had no other purpose but to flesh it out. To give it a contour it might otherwise not have.

– I don't know what to make of all this. You'll have to take the lead.

– But then we're switching places. Thea is leading Tesman. Alright, our question is: how is the nail of dissidence and discontent driven deep into the wood of philosophical discourse?

– Is this question only applicable to him? Is it not something that should be viewed generally?

– I think you've hit upon this "how" already. How if not for others? How if not for a whole tradition of hitting the nail of dissidence and discontent into the wood of philosophical discourse?

– Now it's so large you could practically throw anyone in.

– I'm with you, Andrew. Does that seem strange? Me, the enthusiast? In any event, I support your cause, I mean, conjecture.

– In my own modest way I've made a few stabs at rattling the cage. However, I know there are others who go much further and make a career out of it.

– Ah, ha! A career! They make a career out of it. So they pitch their tents in a field different from the others.

– There are cranks and crackpots amongst them. Perhaps they don't so much pitch their tents as get pitched out of the main camp.

– A bit of both, I suppose, Andrew. Do you ever suddenly feel that you're

faced with too much? That you're pushing on with something only because you started with it and are reluctant to let it go?

– It sounds like life to me.

– I'm dedicated to saying all I can about how he drives the nail into the wood. And yet there's all this other stuff.

– What else can we do but push on?

– Take this essay on Wittgenstein. I've already given some idea as to how he went at it. It's written in a kind of Wittgensteinian way and yet sometimes using Wittgenstein against himself.

– Sounds like deconstruction.

– Something like that. Only it's before he read — oh, I don't want to go into that yet. Or maybe I should. Maybe I should go into it because it shows how things don't always follow a linear path. How you sometimes go down this or that route, give it up for various reasons, decide it's not for you and then later decide it is for you.

– Nothing so special about that, Alice. We all do it on occasion.

– Then what about the urge not to, simply because it's so common, let it slip out of sight? What sort of protest is being made here?

– Are you speaking as one who's making the protest or simply noting it?

– I'm overwhelmed, Andrew. I know it's just an emotional response but I feel it should be registered. Am I protesting or only taking note of it? Am I a partisan? Yes! Am I a pure objective observer? No! Am I nothing more than a partisan? No! Am I trying to be an objective observer? Yes!

– For his sake of course.

– For his sake, Andrew. What I've got to note gives an indication of what he thinks is a general insight into philosophy.

– Let's hear it.

– It's his initial resistance to deconstruction. His being at one time far more

of a metaphysician as a philosophical self than he ever was as a poetic or literary one.

– I'm glad to see you're taking the bull by the horns.

– I'm glad to see a sort of symbiotic relationship springing up between us, Andrew, that I can credit as much to your good-heartedness as to my subtle and not-so-subtle ruses.

I have the feeling that I have been relegated to something like the role of Hamlet's ghost who must shout from underneath the stage: "Remember!"

– Oh, I hear you, truepenny. Only the ghost in Hamlet doesn't shout "Remember!"

– Andrew, this initial-resistance-to-deconstruction thing is important because it's the counterpart to an initial and perduring resistance to it by the vast majority of people.

– Oh, really?

– This resistance has a head and spinal chord to it that gives itself reasons.

– Gives itself reasons? Head and spinal chord?

– Yes, It's something like the backbone of a community and all its reasons which are this backbone and all its strength and security are here and at the same time almost indistinguishable from its stupidity.

– Alice, we're talking about the philosophical community.

– Yes, where this stupidity is written over as strategy that effaces itself. Oh, I'm just sputtering out these thoughts that come from him. I know I'm not really thinking for myself. This strategy is not really a strategy in any classical sense but is interfused with a moral and ethical commitment that wards off the disaster of a wholesale commitment to deconstruction.

– Hmm.

– But perhaps I'm going too fast. Let's just talk about this resistance. How does it manifest itself? It manifests itself by scrupulously examining everything except itself.

- *That’s a good deal and it would be hard to get anything done otherwise.*
- *Philosophy is incapable of the most powerful self-examination except at the cost of itself.*
- *Then obviously there’s good reason for it not to look too hard at itself.*
- *But that’s not where we are, Andrew. That’s not where he is. There’s a part of philosophy – call it truth-telling – that’s inimical to putting self-preservation before the truth.*
- *Before the truth?*
- *Well, before the hardest truth. Before — I’m not sure exactly what to call it but it’s always in some sense against the truth.*
- *Really? I’ll tell you, Alice, I can think of a few choice words and without straining my brain to describe this paradox.*
- *Pejoratives mostly, aren’t they? Words used by the tradition to make it sound like the other line of thought is marginal rather than intrinsic.*
- *Oh, dear! I see what’s being asked but I also see the point of staying in the valley where the human community is.*
- *Andrew, look me in the eyes and tell me you’d rather be in your little room dreaming of Ireland than on some wind-swept height with vine leaves in your hair.*
- *I’m not particularly attracted to — oh, Alice, I don’t have the physique for it. If only I could play Lear on some wind-swept heath.*

*“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
 Till you have drenched our steeples, drown’d the cocks!
 You sulphurous and thought-cleaving fires,
 Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Smite flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!
 Crack nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once,
 That make ingrateful man!”*

- *There are vine leaves in your hair, Andrew. I can see them.*
- *Oh, nothing but thorns and briars, my dear. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were my daughter, Cordelia. But I'm afraid I haven't been in my right mind of late.*
- *And so I am, I am. Oh, Andrew, where have you been with such talent? What great roles awaited you if only you'd taken a chance with your life.*

Remember!

- *Why has he restricted himself to the role of ghost? Why has he abandoned the main part and left us with the meatier ones?*
- *A question of taste, I suppose.*
- *Taste?*
- *Well, now that he's more or less one with his work and can't scrounge up any critical distance between himself and it, an overly monologic discourse would be too much like pretending some final answer.*
- *It seems that just as some philosophers are afraid of sounding too indefinite, others are afraid of sounding too dogmatic.*
- *I think it's safe to say we're carrying on after his death. Oh, not his real death, of course. But his literary or philosophical death in *On Truth-telling*.*
- *What! Are you serious? Alice, how can there be an essay on *On Truth-telling* if the author abandons it? How can he speak the truth about his subject if he's no longer speaking?*
- *But, Andrew, what is all this if not his speaking? What are we if not his speaking?*
- *The one may very well be his speaking but we are, as his speaking self, philosophically out of play. We can't be his voice and his thoughts upon pain of being false as fictitious characters.*
- *Rather let's say upon pain of being characters. People in our own right and yet...*

- *Either way it's a loss of an authentic voice.*
- *...we're bound up with him, you must agree, in a very close and particular way.*
- *Oh, you much more than I. If it weren't for you, I'd have bailed out long ago. Thea — I mean, Alice, you carry me along with more force than I have strength to resist. You could take me to the bottom of a rabbit hole right now and I think I'd be content to spend all my days soaking up your nonsense about how great an actor I am.*

Remember!

- *Oh, not quite dead? Well, we swear, I suppose, to carry out this mission.*
- *Wittgenstein was very special. A logician who kept sounding like he didn't want to be one.*
- *Read it.*

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