

58. End of the Trajectory

- Well, we're all in the same boat. We never know what others will make of what we take to be greatest and highest.*
- Andrew, that's just it.*
- And still to believe we're doing something worthwhile. That's the hard part.*
- That's the risk, isn't it?*
- But what about this valuing risk? Why should we be attached to it?*
- Why should we value our freedom? And why sometimes to the point of risking our lives?*
- It —*
- Goes right back —*
- To origins that are out of sight.*
- We're nothing but a blip on the radar screen.*
- Of whatever has been or may be.*
- Called freedom.*
- Call it beyond freedom.*
- Freedom and non-freedom together.*
- The non-freedom of our freedom perhaps.*
- Of being condemned to our freedom.*
- Yes, as Sartre memorably put it.*
- Andrew, those lines from Hamlet. Can you do them?*
- What lines?*
- That go: "What a piece of work is man!"*

- *"What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the paragon of animals! and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"*
- *How large you become when you have such lines!*
- *Alice, we better move along. Words, words, words, When are we to get at these two things?*
- *Yes, that's the question.*
- *It takes time to read works of this nature.*
- *I guess you've sat on a lot of thesis committees over the years.*
- *Alice, let's not fool ourselves. I'm not here to read them. I'm here to hear what you have to say about them.*
- *How they drive the nail of dissidence and discontent deep into the wood of philosophical discourse?*
- *How do they do it? In two words.*
- *By attacking scholarly arguments. By attacking the whole business of scholarly argumentation. By attacking the whole business of philosophical argumentation.*
- *I have the master's thesis here. Is it involved in this wholesale attack on philosophical argumentation?*
- *It's involved without being the thing itself. In fact, there never really is the thing itself. Even the doctoral thesis, which goes much further, is only the semblance of this wholesale attack.*
- *So the attack is not real.*
- *The attack's real enough. The attack may be against mere shadows and not hit anything substantial, but, in the realm of truth-telling, that counts for something. You think this is mere word play? But suppose it could be proven all philosophizing is word play?*

- *Has he proven it?*
- *Oh, what's proof? We shell it out and it's either accepted or not. Of course it's proof. I have no doubt that it's anything but proof. But I also know that many others would find reasons not to think it proof.*
- *But you'd find reasons to discount their reasons.*
- *Of course. And what's more I'd be willing to bet I'd outlast them.*
- *A bet you'd lose if you're mortal like me.*
- *You might as well say an argument I'd lose if, like all other arguments, it has the fate of either dying as an argument and becoming, at the very best, a cultural artifact. Or, on the other hand, continuing on as an easy target (but not too easy) for a host of interpretative, rhetorical, and argumentative elements driven by the desire to get to the truth of a matter a little or a lot better than it does.*
- *Can you run that by me again?*
- *I think what I've just said sums up the whole picture except that, when other arguments take up this picture, it looks slight and ridiculous.*
- *Infinitely so.*
- *But then again I suppose my argument makes all arguments look slight and ridiculous.*
- *Alice, I think I grasp the overall picture you're drawing. Or at least the one he's drawn. But what am I to do now? Play external examiner? Test you on every aspect of it? Make sure you've put forward a good solid argument for it?*
- *Oh, Andrew — !*
- *I know, I know. But it can't be ignored. The most powerful argument against you is that you hoist yourself on your own petard.*
- *The most powerful argument against argumentation is that it can never be quite fair. Never one hundred per cent fair. And that's what he more or less shows.*

- *So he's written hundreds of pages to show nothing more than that?*
- *Andrew, when you consider that virtually every philosopher starts and ends as if this weren't a troubling factor. As if his argumentation were somehow absolved from what afflicts – oh, I'm sure he'd be willing to attest to this! – everyone else's, then something leaps into prominence that, if your subject is truth-telling, shouldn't be ignored.*
- *So this is how he drives the nail of dissidence and discontent deep into the wood of philosophical discourse?*
- *By coming up with the subject that, in a sense, has been staring everyone in the face. That's written all over literature and poetry and for that matter life itself but has never been put in such a forthright way.*
- *Hats off! What else is there to say?*
- *So are you persuaded that, whatever discourse he examines, be it on one side of a debate or the other, he always finds evidence of a lack of transparency?*
- *I'm convinced, Alice.*
- *Are we really at the top of the mountain? So easily? Oh, Andrew, if we are, it's only with the feeling that I've somehow cheated. That I've brought you to this point not of your own free will but with a kind of coercion and violence.*
- *Alice, that may be. But I'm here. I'm ready to take responsibility for it. I'm sure that if I was his thesis examiner, I'd be mightily impressed. I might even call his work brilliant. But at the end of the day it's my pet thoughts and projects I'll go back to. They don't necessarily go with taking his work too much to heart.*
- *I was hoping to go a bit further into these theses.*
- *There's a ton of information here that probably won't change one jot what's already been said.*
- *So much has been said already but not formally. Not in the way of strict argumentation. Strange to think I should want to draw you into this. That I should have to appeal to its authority.*

- Tell me how these theses went. Their reception. That might be more enlightening than worrying about the rest.*
- Oh, Andrew, are you really interested? Are you willing to give us a second breath? Are you ready to push up the mountain a bit higher?*
- Now that I’m breathing mountain air and enjoy the view for the most part, I’m not in a hurry to go back. But let’s not pretend I’m won over to anything. It’s just that, like other human beings, I have to get away from myself for a while.*
- Your goodness shines through. It’s more than mine because, unlike you, I’m willing to put people at risk.*
- Hmm.*
- Andrew, there isn’t much to say about how the master’s thesis was received. Oh, I could carry on a gossipy this or that but how would that carry us ever higher?*
- So that leaves us with the doctoral thesis.*
- Yes. Oh, there’s these other essays but how could we — no, it would never be more than covering old ground.*
- It’s difficult to plunge into a new or not-so-familiar area and grasp all its intricacies. In fact, if I were to fault scholars, it would be that they habitually pretend to do just that.*
- So we’re not going to do what’s ridiculously impossible. Andrew, even this thesis by itself is too much. But maybe the story that goes with it – how I shall get it out I don’t know yet – is worth something.*
- What does it testify to, Alice? How does it bear upon the subject at hand?*
- First of all, if I didn’t think it was about his pushing higher, I wouldn’t want to bring it up. Secondly, if I didn’t think it was true to what’s already been said, to a sort of orientation that can always be a disorientation and then, whether wanted or not, whether suspected or not, a reorientation, I would close the book on the matter right now.*
- Perhaps I will read some of these things. Perhaps others will too. In any*

event, I've got the feeling that whatever you have to say is more vital for our purpose.

– Andrew, I can't speak now as if the context were one of confrontation like at Concordia. I can't speak now as if he were more a rebel figure than a person grooming himself for a professional career. And I can't speak as if he were one constantly thinking of mountain climbing rather than valley dwelling. At least I can't speak now of all this unless I think of him as a divided self that, after suffering this division in himself, returned to himself.

– Will you never get over exalting him? I'm sorry, but if we're to meet on some common ground, you'll have to stop this.

– Andrew, perhaps you should tell me to stop breathing. Oh, I know very well — Andrew, you can't meet me here. You never will.

– Go on.

– It's mostly to do with what life seems to hold out, may hold out, can hold out if you conform a few degrees more to a certain prevalent standard. If you're just a little more receptive in your heart of hearts to a certain way of being. And if you make the adjustments – jump through the hoops that others jump through – to get to the other side.

– O speak no more!

– It's basically the standard that society exalts without paying too much attention to what it costs in terms of being true and honest. It's basically what we all want apart from truth and what we're willing to sacrifice for it.

– Are there no exceptions?

– None. Oh, look at Socrates! Doesn't he thrive on winning arguments? Isn't he being a bit too ingenuous when he claims that, for the sake of truth, he'd be happy to lose one?

– Your point is that we're all thrust into the position of hiding something about ourselves.

– And maybe from ourselves so that it will always take others to reveal it.

– What sharp eyes you grant to your hero! You seem to think he can peer

behind the sharpest eyes.

– In his own manner he can which, because it's his own manner, might be right here and wrong there. Andrew, if your eyes are so sharp, you find out his blind spot.

– I don't know where we're going. My eyes can't follow this highly indeterminate – or is it over-determined? – trajectory.

– Over-determined? Perhaps. By prejudice. By hero-worshipping. By some ethico-aesthetic teleology. Andrew, I'm pushing for him. Your resistance is, well –

– Symbolic.

– But you must confess it's got some substance to it. Andrew, the division: how can I do anything else but symbolize it?

– My head's beginning to ache. It must be this high altitude.

– There was this beautiful young couple who intrigued him and who exemplified everything that could be called not only academic success but much else.

– Married couple?

– Indeed. And married to philosophy as well. Married to doing superbly as doctoral students. The perfect couple. Believe me, the perfect union of correctness, planning, protocol, procedure, high-level commitment and high-level performance.

– Paragons. Paradigms of philosophy students. I've seen a few. And they usually get their careers going very early.

– Well, certainly these did and they took every step to make sure this would happen. Delving into all sorts of activities. The student's association, conferences, the graduate students philosophy journal, publications, even a book by him and her, oh, scholarships and medals and teaching – the both of them did that – and even the organizing of extra-curricular activities. Andrew, don't you think that such people can't be surpassed?

– They sound like a well-oiled machine.

- *A very beautiful, sympathetic, friendly, and even generous machine to boot.*
- *The point being they represented something alluring and attractive to your hero.*
- *When you see a dream that has so much material substance and when your own dream is looking a bit shabby, well, then it does look enticing.*
- *You ask yourself, I suppose, whether you're still on the right track.*
- *Oh, Andrew, your good faith...*
- *Why do you keep praising me so?*
- *...is what keeps this whole thing going. Andrew, they were a genuinely nice couple. There's nothing that could be said against them that wouldn't be an injustice.*
- *But you're going to say it anyway.*
- *Do I have a choice, Andrew? Do I have a choice when for truth-telling it's not a matter of being a precision tool such as the university and, let's go further, society wants but an altogether different one?*
- *Beautiful. Truly amazing what language can accomplish. You've managed to turn that silk purse of a couple into a sow's ear.*
- *I would rather think that a silk purse is all their reward whereas his is where moths and thieves will never go.*
- *The threadbare dream seems to have been in not too bad a shape.*
- *I'm making my way very slowly to the point that might be called the reception or non-reception of his work. I'm trying to be - as I hope you've noticed - fair and diplomatic.*

Who were his professors? What has to be said about them? Fortunately not much because he got along well with them. There were some incidents resembling what went on at Concordia but of such minor note I won't speak about them. All in all things went rather smoothly. Swimmily even. Again I won't stop to give details on what might be called his scholarly

achievements. It's never been his CV he wanted to write large or at least not in any conventional sense.

Older than the other students, he nonetheless enjoyed a second youth. Indeed, it might be said that he was accepted all-round as some more extended, experienced, heterogeneous form of youth.

He worked hard and was well rewarded. Nobody put any obstacles in his path. Not to say that everything was perfect but mostly he was treated with kindness and respect. Over five and even six years. He felt like an insider many times. And when he received his doctoral degree, well, it was a conferring of identity.

The doctoral degree. A door-opener if a few things were in place. Perhaps he was a little slow in getting things in place. Perhaps even a little reluctant. But it can't be said that he didn't get or at least try to get some things in place.

The day he asked one professor to sit on his thesis committee, he didn't respond negatively when the latter asked him if he planned to make a career out of teaching philosophy.

Teaching philosophy. Teaching philosophy in the university. This prospect as viable undertaking. Joining the human race. Being like others. Taking advantage of what's near at hand. What can be put to use. Negotiating with the long-held belief that your interests could only be dramatically, triumphantly realized.

The life of the valley. A certain formal or social elevation that could be enjoyed and had heretofore been missing. A certain recognition and those attendant benefits. Compared to what? What exactly? Some great writing event? But where was that? What substance, what shape or form did it have? What a pale insubstantial thing it seemed compared to — well, we won't go into that. We've heard enough about your erotic flights of fancy. All the same — and it's a consideration — you've always been a pig in your imagination as much as you've wanted to be my knight in shining armour.

— Alice, you're drifting off. The temptation thing — the life of the valley and all that — I get it. You've got him, you know, almost where Milton put Christ. Over and over again there's this hero motif that refuses to go away. That glories in its identity, in this recognition of itself, even to the point of pounding nails in itself.

– It always mystified him that he couldn't find me, someone like me in the Department. Andrew, if he had found me, someone like me, what would've happened?

– Alice, you're an obsession. You can't be real. But if you were, if you were truly flesh and blood, you would've burned him up like a goddess.

– So I end up here with you.

– Which seems to be the best thing if you truly want him to be a hero. Alice, I hope you don't burn me up. Although of course I'm not attached to you like he is, I'm pulled along by some force that your youth, beauty, and good will – yes, even your good will – makes a bit frightening.

– Let's hear no more of it. We're just old friends. The spell will be broken shortly. My staff will be thrown deeper than plummet's sound and you will be returned to your airy freedom. Andrew, perhaps I'm guilty of making too much of his trials and tribulations when compared to what others have gone through. The intellectual conscience thing, this Nietzschean intellectual conscience thing, is not the battlefield most people understand. Or even think worthy – well, how could they if they don't understand it? Outside the subject of truth-telling nothing is great or extraordinary about resisting the temptation of professionalism even while rubbing up so very close to it. Nothing is great or extraordinary about, while continually being in this environment, continually finding ways to challenge or subvert it. And maybe, when all is said and done, nothing would be great and extraordinary about it if it weren't for finding a way to write about it. If it weren't for finding the subject that nobody else has ever written about and being as thorough and true in the treatment of it as humanly possible.

You're such an emotional thing! Who would've believed it? We're going to have to wrap up soon or else you'll go to pieces on me.

– Alice, there's this missing something I've always wanted to experience. Perhaps I thought I'd find it in Ireland. In a way I'm experiencing it now. With you. With him even. Oh, if only he were you – as fresh and beautiful as you are! And if only I were he – as he is to you! What mountaintop then wouldn't I be ready to climb!

– Andrew, a hero is nothing if not a sail, a fair breeze, a straight line, a clear direction. In just four days he went from being hard hit in his thesis writing to making his thesis writing the hardest hit.

Am I over-dramatizing? I don't think so. How many people, if they get shipwrecked along one route, end up choosing a more difficult and more dangerous one?

Andrew, do you want specifics? Do you want to be bored by specifics? Andrew, how many theses have you shot down during your career?

– Shot down? You mean raised objections to?

– I mean said they couldn't clear the gate. Weren't doable and all that sort of thing.

– I don't know, Alice. There are many theses that start off on the wrong track and have to be significantly modified.

– Ah-hah! So you know what that's all about. And do the students normally fall into line? Do they normally take their marching orders from the professors?

– Alice, you've already made it abundantly clear what an independent spirit he is. Let's leave it or you'll do him less honour talking about it than not.

– No, it can't be dropped because it's not just a matter of driving this point home. It's also a matter of showing what in a certain sense can never be driven home. I mean to say this sense of independence as ego – as id, ego, and super-ego – can still be rocked, shaken, knocked off its pedestal. And this by forces that others don't feel or at least not to the extent of imminent collapse and ruin.

The very day after his thesis was shot down, he went to see a professor about doing another one.

The professor saw that he was upset and not reasoning well. He wanted to work in an area that, up to that time, he'd shown little interest in.

Actually, that's not going far enough. He wanted to work in an area that, up to that time, he'd been hostile to.

– It sounds like he lost his head.

– He did. For a time. On the other hand, his crossing over, going over to the

other side as it were...

- Going over? Crossing over to the other side?

- ...was something he had already observed in others as a...

- I'm afraid I don't understand.

- ...kind of using their heads. Andrew, I'm talking about students who make the jump from where their interests principally lie to where their convenience lies. From where their interests are still tied to their heart to where they're only tied to their head. I'm talking about what's done all the time in the name of convenience and utility and efficiency and practicality and necessity and everything else you want to lump into this area.

So his losing his head and their using their heads haven't much that differentiates them apart from a certain precipitousness, I won't say panickiness, on his part. At least not on the practical level. On the level of the intellectual, imaginative, and emotional life of a person, the distance between them is virtually the distance between life and death.

Am I getting close to some vital point? To some nerve centre? Oh, what does it matter if you end up telling the truth about B instead of A as long as you end up telling the truth about it? What does it matter if telling the truth about B has no relation to telling the truth about oneself? What does it matter? Yes, that's where it all hinges because for a large part of truth-telling it doesn't matter. For a large part of this seemingly straightforward business, the "if" is effaced as if it didn't matter.

As if it didn't matter. That's important to note too. It's another "if" that's keeps alive the first one in more than a formal or rhetorical way. If things are conducive to wiping out the most fundamental "ifs" then fine. But if they're not, if they're precisely there to engage us in a task from which all higher and indeed highest sentiments spring, then there's also a task, a difficult and sometimes inexpressible task, to call attention to this.

So he teetered and tottered around the thesis business for a few days until it came to him that, if he were to be true to himself, he couldn't let a setback prevent him from being even more daring and radical.

- What're we talking about?

– Principally language. The use of it in philosophical discourse. Principally how it escapes this use or rather how, in a manner of speaking, it is used and abused even before this use.

You can see how, in order to make it succeed as a thesis, he had to use a certain scholarly or philosophical space already carved out. A certain space that – well, let's face it – is pretty much always an identification of the scholarly with the philosophical. I say pretty much because, if it were ever more than this, ever a pure identification of the one with the other, the thesis would've never been written and the space never carved out.

I think I'm already sketching out the site of the reception non-reception of his thesis. It's not only a matter of dealing with how he came to choose such a difficult and not-so-welcome subject but also how he had to lay it out like a well-ordered city. Like a place where the main arteries could be identified as big-name philosophers and all other routes as scholars arguing, commenting, interpreting, citing, referring, and so on.

– It's been said that Wittgenstein's Tractatus wouldn't be accepted today as a thesis project.

– This was in fact said to him by the professor whom he ran to in desperation. Brilliance and innovation and insight, leave that to the theatre as first marks of approval. The university wants the tried and true to be known and shown to be known before anything else.

How much luck was there in the fact that he found exactly the right site for himself. How much luck indeed in the fact that he managed to find a way to his doctoral degree and yet, at the same time, be a rebel. Be a sort of Nietzschean figure and live dangerously.

You see the title. I think you get a glimpse of what I'm talking about.

It's not just that he dealt with, wrote about, analysed the bête noire of contemporary philosophy. It's that he complicated his thought.

Do you know something, Andrew? Even the external examiner admitted as much. And yet he came close to saying in his report (which went on for ten pages by the way) that he detested it. After eight pages of not being very nice and defending his own work from what he considered to be a thoroughly unjust critique of it, he came to a rather surprising conclusion.

– Perhaps you can sum up this conclusion in your own words.

– I'd rather not. It may be hard to understand and in fact will be hard to understand because it comes from a much larger context but, on the other hand, it's the testimony of a hostile witness who, in affirming the thesis's ultimate success (even though he calls it an anti-thesis) is perhaps the best witness of all.

Let me read it, Andrew. It's only a few lines. He's summing up the thesis after having done nothing but complain about it.

Par rapport au débat Derrida-Ricoeur, on peut favoriser le premier (D+), le second (R+), ni l'un ni l'autre (D-, R-) ou l'un et l'autre (D+, R+). Ces positions correspondent respectivement aux études allogènes de Clark, Stellardi, Bouchard et Lawlor.

Bouchard's the external examiner. He wrote a book on metaphor or, more precisely, the Derrida-Ricoeur debate on metaphor. So, you see, it's this work he's referring to along with three others.

Cela, semble-t-il, ne laisse guère de marge d'originalité à M. Hunter. Mais, dans la mesure où Lawlor veut seulement clarifier le débat, sa position laisse place à une autre interprétation, complexifiante celle-là. De plus, M. Hunter avoue non seulement un manque (relative) d'impartialité, mais aussi un penchant pour Derrida (D++- R+-). Mais comme, finalement, Derrida, à toute la fin, se mérite lui aussi quelques critiques, M. Hunter relève de la formule: D++-, R+-, ce qui, si l'on veut, témoigne de sa (sur-) complexité.

What he's doing here makes it seem as if he (I don't mean Bouchard but Monsieur Hunter) was still trying to get the better of Derrida and Ricoeur even though he credits him (Monsieur Hunter) with boosting both of them (Derrida and Ricoeur) while favouring Derrida a little more than Ricoeur whereas in fact it was the debate itself (as much as what went on between them can be called a debate) that was being analysed and it was this debate as radically different attempts to tell the truth about metaphor and, most particularly, its relation to philosophy that was complicated and over-complicated or rather, shown to be complicated and over-complicated.

Do you sort of get the idea?

– I think this Bouchard allows for an originality that he may misjudge and thoroughly dislike and yet, whether it's one or the other or both together, it's his professionalism that shines through at the end.

– Yes, bravo. But what about this show of originality? And in a department, don't forget, that doesn't encourage originality or at least only a certain version of it?

– The fact that he took on the bête noire of philosophy departments and didn't merely simplify his thought as is commonly done; the fact that he convinced people not wholly congenial to this way of proceeding that his thesis was original and should lead to his being conferred a doctoral degree; the fact that all this came out of an earlier project that was derailed and, instead of making him choose a less risky path, made him choose a riskier one – these three facts speak of something rare and significant.

– Voila! Oh, Andrew, if that struggle and achievement were translated to some physical activity, how much noise it would've made! How much fanfare there would've been! But because it was merely spiritual and intellectual, because it was merely about truth-telling, it raised as much indifference as — oh, he should've got more attention! He should've got much more encouragement! He should've got a better reception! He should've been lifted to the very clouds!

Andrew, I speak as one who sometimes has no self-restraint. But you know where that comes from.

Andrew, there's this whole business of philosophical debates. His examining them. And then his being examined as to how he examined them. And then its being debated as to how he examined or thought he examined them. Andrew, what if there's a part of philosophy where a debate, a real debate, never takes place?

– I think there's the general feeling that, if there is this area you speak about, it's caused by something, rightly or wrongly, called the non-philosophical.

– Oh, that's the very thing!

– It's the movement of it into the domain of philosophy.

– There it is! There it all is! And do you know what, Andrew? Do you know

what it really is? The non-philosophical can't debate or at least can only debate with itself and the same goes for the other side.

– But what is this non-philosophical? That's the question.

– Whatever you want it to be. For some it's Derrida and deconstruction. For others it's poetry, literature, and almost life itself. For a whole bunch of people, in other words, it's whatever gets in the way of reason, pure reason which always turns out to be somebody's personal reasoning and wants a voice for itself.

It's what reason resists and what resists reason. It's what reason resists with reason and, because this is inescapably the prejudice as well as the prudence of reason (that is, to think of reason always having reasons for and never against itself), non-reason.

So, getting back to the debate-thing, it's really all so much feinting and posturing and shadowboxing. So much expert swordplay that may make a palpable hit or two but without the envenomed points that would be fatal to one side or the other.

– This is a rough indictment. Some would say it's the prejudice of non-reason.

– Of non-philosophy. Of course. That's the circle. And if truthtelling is to demonstrate this circle, it must make all the same gestures of debating and arguing as the other side.

– You mean it must be at once the quackery it condemns and the condemnation of this quackery?

– Well, that's putting it a bit strongly, Andrew. Quackery implies something that can and should be eliminated. But if you think for a second that truthtelling can eliminate all quackery, if you think there's at least one moment of truthtelling that can be absolutely pure and without it, then – well, to put it as strong as you – this is a form of quackery.

And my form of quackery is thinking I should have to trot out all the various arguments of this thesis. I'm already done this or am doing it in a way but imagine if I'd done it the other way. I mean the way of formal argumentation. Then I could be accused of such a sin against his overall argument – I mean what passes for a sort of argument and yet is a

heterogeneous mix of non-arguments and anti-arguments – that it would've been better if he'd never borne me.

– All this mountain-climbing is his argumentation. Only made out to be something else. Poetic perhaps. Do you see how far I've come?

– You look weak, Andrew. You're weakening. Pretty soon you'll have to go back down.

– I don't think so. I feel rather good actually.

– It's the altitude. You're starting to think you actually belong here. That you wanted to be here in the first place.

– I don't remember. Did I or didn't I? Alice, I don't know what this game has become. All I can say is I feel as if my insides had been carved out.

– It's time to end it. You've come all the way up and now it's time to go back down.

– You mean go home? You mean leave this office? Alice, I'm already returning to myself. It's this office I've always belonged to.

– Andrew, goodbye.

– You're staying behind? You'll be sure to lock up? Alright then....

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