

6. Post-European Self versus European Self

– I see two dilemmas brought up in what you're saying. The first has to do with how your former self is related to your present one. And the second how the subject of yourself is related to the one of truth-telling. Let's deal with the first (for your whole project deals with the second) by bringing in the voice of your former self. Go ahead. Examine it. Question this other self that comes to you from over thirty years ago.

Are you free and open?

– I try to be.

I'm sure you do. But still you might not be as free and open as you think. [*The young man shrugs.*] What I mean is, if we never know ourselves fully, then maybe we're directed in ways we can't be conscious of.

– I can't argue with this. I just think that, if you make an effort to know yourself as well as possible, you gain control of these other factors.

But is there any guarantee that all these factors, especially the most determinant ones, lend themselves to being known? For example, if I asked you how you came to think it was important to be free and open, how would you answer? But perhaps that is not a fair question. Instead, let me play the devil's advocate. The attitude of being free and open is fine if harnessed to some study or discipline. But in your case, there has been little of that. You dropped out of high school at seventeen and, except for a brief stint at a community college, you have bounced around from pillar to post. During this same period many others of your age have submitted themselves to a rigorous, formal education. It seems to me you have been rather lax for, if I don't miss my guess, you're someone who wants to get the most out of himself.

– When I was in high school, I thought I would go to university. But when I got into the working world, I developed a rapport with rough types that encouraged me to think they were more honest than smooth ones. And since the smooth ones most commonly belonged to institutions, it seemed to me that, with respect to them, a price was being exacted and a gilded cage being forged. And so, being averse to this, I thought it better to stay with wide-open places, wide-open choices, wide-open experiences, and wide-open people.

Wide open with their prejudices, you mean. Wide open with their simplified thoughts on a host of complicated matters. You're not going to tell me this

sort of free school with its barroom or barnyard talk produces anything more than highly limited displays of speaking one's mind.

– I know they have limitations. Sometimes even gross ones. But why should that be an excuse for others who, standing on the authority of their abilities – and sometimes less – keep a large part of themselves out of sight? Before I went to Europe, I worked alongside a lot of different people. I have no illusions about their virtues or the extent of their knowledge. I'm not saying they're the best company at all times. But neither am I saying they're the worst. What I'm saying is there is something they have that, if you're halfway concerned about truth, should be paid attention to.

Do you believe in truth?

– Of course.

And should seeking after the truth proceed in an orderly or disorderly fashion?

– Orderly.

And should truth seeking be restricted to a few people or open to all?

– To all.

And so you will agree that no one should be barred from discussing a matter on which they are competent? Now if each of the competent speakers so allowed into the conversation decided to be absolutely transparent and reveal all the background processes by which they came to the subject at hand, what do you think would result?

I take it you see the problem. If all sorts of personal matters such as secret motivations, subtle influences, private likes and dislikes were tolerated as part of the discussion, what would happen to it? Wouldn't it stand a good chance of never getting off the ground?

And if such were the case, what would there be then? A bunch of people talking mostly to themselves. With few people listening and even fewer understanding. A Tower of Babel with truth in the possession of everyone and no one.

– I'm not in a position to refute your argument. I just think everything isn't

said by it.

If truth is just a sort of mass commodity, a way of furnishing plans, material, and motivations for all sorts of building projects, what's that saying? What's that leaving out? Everything that's untruth? Why, then, look how much untruth there is! In a line, for instance, like: "Man doth not live by bread alone." I'm not religious and yet I tell you, I've always loved that line. "Man doth not live by bread alone." It's so deep it's bottomless. It can't be filled by any theory. It's the truth of every person and yet it can't be put in the marketplace because it's not the same for everyone. Does that make it any less the truth?

Are you entitled to use the word truth in every which way you please? To stretch it hither and yon? I come back to my main point. If everyone followed your example, there would be no discussion. There would only be isolated testimonials. Fragmented views of this and that. The word truth would be emptied of all value and meaning. The centre could not hold, to paraphrase Yeats. (Are you familiar with this Irish poet?) Mere anarchy would be loosed upon the world.

– Perhaps there is more than one way of telling the truth. Not everybody has to be doing the same thing. Take poets and writers. They don't conform to the criteria of scientific investigation. And yet they still have something to say that rings true.

What they say falls outside the bounds of the true and the false. It is neither one nor the other. Therefore it would be best not to abuse the word truth by applying it to their works.

– I don't know how to respond to this except to say it doesn't sound true. It's as if you were saying a poet or writer doesn't make any substantial contribution to understanding. As if we could dispense with them and not have something wrenched out of ourselves that would be the wrenching out of all our understanding.

I suppose we do need a context.

– What?

A place, a position, a centring of ourselves that comes before we know it. You're still missing out on a higher education. But I suppose you think, wanting to be a writer, you don't really need it.

– Why do you keep harping on that? It seems you think I have taken a wrong turn. That either I should have put myself on a different course or not be a writer at all.

You're not saying the second, are you? Alright then, if that is the case I ask what better course could I be on than the present one? The one of getting out into the world and experiencing it from many different angles? The one of coming into contact with many different people and learning how they live and work and think and feel? The one of following the example of many great writers who, if their works themselves count as evidence, took the wide open highway of life to be tutored and instructed?

I don't think I have made a wrong turn. Nothing has ever stopped me from picking up a book and reading whatever I liked. Nothing has ever prevented me from asking questions and trying to come up with some answers. Nothing has ever kept me from thinking deeply on a matter and being concerned about what is right and wrong, good and bad, or true and false.

In a way I don't feel I have ever left school. Just the curriculum has changed. For eight years I have been going to classes. I attend those I like and as much as I like. Those I don't like or think aren't working I skip. My greatest instructor is my interest and my highest motivation the desire to do my best. Nothing is ruled out beforehand and, if I think it best to take a course I refused to consider previously, then I take it. With these guidelines I'm open to all possibilities that have to do with finding a true path.

But will you count what you're on as the true path if you don't reach your objective? Not everyone gets to the highest rung. I know you want truth in your writing. But what happens if your writing simply falls short? What happens if the intention is good but the writing isn't?

– If I fail, I fail. But at least I must try.

There was a movie I saw when I was in Europe. Among many of its memorable scenes was one where the hero, a phony patient in a mental hospital, tries to lift a heavy drinking fountain. On one level this is just a stunt. But on another it's his way of setting an example for the other patients who, as you quickly find out, have all had something kicked out of them. They're all resigned to their personal limitations and the dehumanizing conditions of the hospital. In any event, there is this scene where he locks his arms around this huge fountain and heaves and strains until it looks like he's ready to die in the attempt.

There is something about failing in this way that attracts me. There is a spiritual dimension to the out-of-the-ordinary that, apart from success or failure, reaches out to others and, unlike the doings of the day-to-day, inspires awe. It's as if you finally were awakened to the true value and potential of a human being. And not only with respect to others but with respect to yourself. At least this is the way it strikes me. It's a call to get the most out of myself by living my life with some risk built into it.

It is hard to imagine how harrowing life may be when your hopes are at the highest. When you feel like a hero ready to embark on an adventure.

You still have this romantic notion that others will applaud you for what you are. It is a bookish, literary, cinematic sort of illusion. Most of the time you will only have your thoughts for cold comfort. Not secret admirers in darkened movie theatres. Not women enamoured to what is noblest and most uplifting in your soul. Not friends and family willing to separate themselves from their own affairs. No, it is much lonelier, less exalting, and longer lasting than you had ever dare to imagine.

If somebody came up to you right now and offered you a better prospect, I know you would consider it. Worldly affairs, after all, are not unimportant. You still expect a good deal. House, wife, family – beautiful wife of course. You haven't given up on any of these, have you? And there are many ways to lead an honourable, adventurous, and interesting life. Truth with a capital T, if this is what you're after, doesn't have to be the only way. There are many fields of study that can be equally satisfying.

– Whatever it is you want to do in life, it takes work to get there and your heart has to be in it.

I already know what it is to feel lonely and without comfort. I can't imagine a whole life like that stretched out before me.

I suppose I could be taken in another direction. Who wouldn't be if the stakes were high enough? If they thought that, despite their greatest effort, they weren't going to succeed?

Why are you filling my ears with this depressing talk? Why are you giving me eyes to the future that would make me renounce and betray my past and present? Show me what you have to offer and then maybe I will reconsider. But if you're just talking a bungalow in the suburbs, two or three cars in the garage, a flock of happy children, and a steady job and income,

well, I have seen all that. If that were where my heart is, believe me, I would be there. Like a million others.

I would have forgotten this whole business of going to Europe. I would have started doing things differently much earlier. Maybe I would have even gone into business. Then I could have been independent and had money and worked around the clock like my uncle. And maybe, like him, I would one day have a beautiful wife that eventually gets ugly and a joking disposition that eventually dries up. Yeah, when I consider a prospect like that, I'm tempted but not much.

The writing is on the wall for all of us and, if I've got to end up old and grey, let it be at least with some fire in the blood and a free spirit. The rest I will suffer from if I don't have it. But not as much as I would suffer without these.

Enough! He's already me. Only a terrible accident or the most improbable turn of events would have made it otherwise.

– We could set it up. Every Samson has his Delilah. But let's assume he's proof against all but the most unlikely temptations. Then his commitment to you, if I may say so, is virtually unshakeable.

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