## *53. Some Mad Thoughts about Philosophy (1995)*

"Generally speaking, one wants to think well of philosophy. However, due to the lack or seeming lack of definitive results, unhappiness and dissatisfaction with it are quite often the order of the day. A good part of our philosophical selves, it seems, would like to find some final resting place for and from deepest problems. Some intellectually hallowed ground for the purpose of burying them once and for all (and then presumably erecting in their place eternal monuments). Less sardonically speaking, perhaps it is that we wish to see imperishable fruit grow from the Tree of Philosophy since it tends to promise or proclaim as much. Perhaps the desire to see such fruit explains the existence of and propensity to the modern sciences. That they abandon deepest problems and seek to pose and solve only ones of their own making, that they ignore all unanswerable questions in favour of ones for which answers are already waiting, is no doubt the necessary compromising and redirected satisfaction of the original impulse which, after centuries of long hard 'empty-handed' struggle, is now very much self-involved, a questioning of its very being or right to be.

"Yet philosophy's questioning of itself, its rigorous soul-searching and self-examination, its often tiresome polemics regarding its own proper role, especially in relation to the other disciplines, is – and here is no doubt both something of the ironic and something of the most straightforward and fitting – the philosophical spirit itself speaking. It is the spirit which forever wants to understand deeply and comprehensively, which will not be satisfied with whatever simply asserts itself appealingly, with that which, in promising certain advantages and fruitful prospects, can buy off to a certain extent the almost pathologically (that is, almost religiously) impassioned and inquiring mind. In short, it is the spirit that won't allow philosophy to rest, to make peace with the most vexing, intractable, and seemingly hopeless of problems.

"Of course the above characterization of philosophy is one which infers numerous inquiring minds interacting with their times as well as their positive and negative reactions to the legacy of earlier ones. Taken in this light, it must be one with these minds while in some sense going beyond them, being forever the movement of radical inquiry, of an unceasing reappearance of what indubitably turns out to be the supremely subversive question and the highly provocative answer. Individually speaking, it often yearns for and places itself at the level of the sure-footed sciences, the disciplines which conveniently adjust their bases for the sake of their development and preservation. While philosophy confounds the one when it confounds the other, it is also the model of the above comportment insofar as it views itself not as a completely finished but a finishable affair. Insofar

as it is not an enterprise which lacks practitioners and active defenders of its presuppositions and principles but, quite the contrary, holds it far-flung fields and vast domains successfully and finds, in so doing, the necessary expedients. But philosophy on the whole and as a movement is quite as much the other thing, that is, the scorn and scourge of the territorially-minded, of the singular expansion and hegemonic drive, of those who put up boundaries. It only endures as – and ultimately recognizes itself in – the wholly free, wholly open, and, if need be, wholly destructive adventure. Disciplined and yet untamed, it finds its glory not so much in the arriving but the striving, in the skirting around and peering into – ultimately in defying – the abysses of doubt, uncertainty, and despair which threaten precipitately. What is sedate in it and finds equilibrium is forever confounded. It is, in some respects, a *mad* adventure.

"The proposal I wish to make is that philosophy must push beyond its present malaise by taking it wholly and willingly upon itself. It must find the bearing up under it and overcoming of it virtually indistinguishable. To escape from such a burden must be so total an undertaking, so unsparing in effort and commitment, so singular in focus, that it places upon philosophy a burden which ultimately cannot be escaped. When, in setting down its burden on occasion, it 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 how many before (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, there are moments philosophy may falter or grow faint of heart but also moments to spur it on to new attempts and to the only true and proper measure of itself.

"Without the feeling of inspiration, of ever-renewed inspiration, a group, a society, a way of life, an individual, an institution, a course of study and learning grows moribund and otiose. Few things appear so inevitable (we may well have reached a point of having too much history) and so singularly sad and oppressive. Confronted with what we know about the mortality of things in general (that is, things formerly taken to be eternal – God, soul, heaven, truth, knowledge, goodness, etc. – and in this way redemptive of specifically human mortality), it is not easy to escape the conclusion that, rather than knowing not enough about such things, we already know too much. What we seem to know only too well is that even the most highly exalted values, ideals, and traditions have their certain life span, their declining course as much as their rising one. Although this may not be the last word on the subject (and, if silence does not follow, it certainly cannot

be), it is the only word which we, in our present situation, can utter honestly and directly.

"Yet we live, and in living humanly, must forever be the living contradiction of this dismal and dreary train of thought. We must perforce be its opposite. In philosophy itself the consciousness of this living contradiction, the deepening of this consciousness, is the particular life of radical inquiry as it now presents itself, signalling perhaps its mortality but also its striving and thriving to the uttermost, beyond the always threatening temptation to play itself out meekly, without lucidity, without a struggle, without a resurgence of desperate vitality, without a bang but a whimper.

"My proposal is that we should entertain the notion of the eventual insupportability of philosophy or, as Horatio tells Hamlet in the graveyard scene, the matter of considering things too curiously. Yet, as with Hamlet, such a consideration asks of philosophy further consideration and, insofar as, by following this course, it remains true to itself to the end (that is to say, to the point when powerful strange events should overtake, in unpredictable ways, all such considerations), it remains great and good for us. We need not despise it, in other words, for equivocating or selling out to the largely unphilosophical world.

"Of course, in making this proposal, a certain way of valuing and judging presents itself. We present the way we think philosophy must go and the way in which it should conduct itself upon the basis of what we see as our own 'sure' direction and what is and will always be – as we should like to think – our conduct. Our speaking at all upon the matter is a vesting of ourselves with a certain kind of authority which can never adequately explain itself, which relies merely upon the fact of having something to say at all upon this matter. If some come along speaking or arguing to the contrary and much better than we can manage, then, while we ourselves may bare our teeth to them and continue in our folly, others certainly will not.

"We really speak then of a certain strain of thinking prompted by, and itself prompting, a growing presentiment, a certain anxiety of the age, itself aging. More than ever, we have difficulty acknowledging anything human or humanly related as that which can still shine upon the soul like an eternal sun and make, by contrast, every crossing shadow and dark place within it insignificant. In point of fact, we see how much our knowledge and understanding, like great heliotropes, have ever searched out this sun and, as much as they have grown high and free-standing but have failed to pierce

the shifting racks of sombre, high-flying clouds, so we begin to agonize over the grey bars imprisoning our puny striving and allowing us but longing looks at the dance which, with all our hearts, we should like to (still should like to) join. The dance of our pretty bright-faced hopes on the evening green, exuberantly oblivious to heaven's closing eye.

"Our poetic way of viewing philosophy, of doing philosophy, is the only answer to the mounting oppression which now bears upon us and yet which we may not abandon without abandoning our philosophical selves. What others call philosophy looks more to us like distraction, or business, or livelihood, or reputation. In other words, passing affairs which neither chasten with ice-cold counsel nor move us with a movement at one time considered sacred, marvellous – the witnessing of the divine presence itself. It is the poetic which can deal best with the paradoxical, is the paradoxical, the philosophical enterprise, the voice of reason itself. At least such is the case when the latter grows in the imagination to titanic proportions and, as well as seeming to resound throughout all being, ennobles mankind in its own eyes and impassions it towards seeing itself, settling itself down on an equal footing with the formerly frightening and mysterious. Science no doubt strongly – and weakly – continues this tradition. Strongly insofar as it maintains an aspect, an aura, an illusion of ever-enlarging itself to a complete comprehension. Weakly insofar as it proliferates in the form of a loosely related collection of more or less separate advances and random avenues of development. It is the sense then of a mere semblance of order, of cohesion, of a rational whole developing which sends us back to the source of systematic thinking, to what unquestionably strives to be a total viewing, a total comprehension.

"Yet now we are in the position of admiring this adventurous spirit, this often unaccountable and often 'unacceptable' abundance of confidence and 'scornful wickedness' less for any single achievement than for daring to sail, always to sail upon open seas. Here is youth and vitality, in other words, married to long hard years of experience, risking *Sturm und Drang* to break the bonds (and often the back) of the already established, the already known and respected, the already won and secured. What proof is ultimately more tested, more resistant to being called into question and doubted, than that rational being has plied this course, this really very bold and reckless course, to its credit and, even if now faced with its most perilous voyage, finds its great strength and maturity in both becoming aware of its severe limitations and, despite this, marshalling itself for the great encounter beyond them?

"Let us present a thought rarely attended to: all the fair and perfect things of this world are the product of some singular, limited viewing, some captured perspective which initiates the struggle to prolong it. At the highest reach this struggle is artful, philosophic, and religious; it means to work some given radiance into a durable, often thought to be eternal form. Such captured perspectives, such radiances are no doubt inexhaustible; they figure in the constant flux of our daily lives which itself is not anything particularly artful, philosophic, or religious. Here is rather the mere play of a proceedings which largely mystifies us and whose power and hold upon us are mostly to our chagrin. It is in opposition to this mixture of circus and miasma that work, in effect, becomes a holy relief – an anchor, a sail, a fair breeze, a clear direction.

"Here, in opposition to everywhere else, our cunning and captaincy count, our story takes on a special hue, and the interest and excitement of a particular life's course transcend banality and the various minutiae tangling up our thoughts, so sorely troubling and even tormenting. To be clear of the latter, to rise up finally above it all – this is the motif, the constant, underlying theme of all exceptional, enduring efforts.

"We have no choice but to think philosophy inspirationally and therefore, under present conditions, tragically. Hence the quality of its movement is the preeminent thing, the non-avoidance of all circumstances and conditions which challenge it radically. Without the latter of course it could not be itself (it would be religion or else some flaccid or fanatically inclined ideology) and yet this very being of itself is, despite understandable slips to the contrary, the willing, the even wilful exposure of itself to severe blows, insults, injuries, and internal ruptures. To disallow these last to make a poor thing of it (we decry the current attempt to downsize it) before the final shakeup, the force which cannot be stayed, is its heroic resolve, its true tenor and accomplishment. What matter all its various propositions and principles in comparison with its living liberally, passionately, and intensely? What matter some final arrival or indolent resting place, some paradoxically regained Garden of Eden in comparison with its having its own story, with its being interesting in its own way?

"So the proposal that I am making is that the emphasis must now fall upon the vision of philosophy as an increasingly stricken but noble venture (the tragic beauty) as opposed to its ever finding some eternal treasure (Truth) or founding some eternally happy race of people (Goodness). I speak with regard to its present situation and a certain tendency to preserve itself at all costs. I speak in light of what appears to me to be the studious avoidance of

this hardest question concerning itself. Indeed, it appears to me as if the question has been hardly raised. Raising it, it risks itself. Not raising it, it is not itself. Or rather it ceases to be itself but in name only. It grows inwardly cold to what it formerly was and retains only an outward show of lukewarm piety. It dies spiritually before it dies physically. It works by degrees towards such a humble petering out of itself rather than towards its most self-revealing encounter. If the latter is more of a madness than the former, it is nonetheless the madness of reason itself – putting on its best show."

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