

LETTER FROM HORN

Hello, my friend ! As promised, a sketch of what I hinted at as we each smoked a cigarette on Laura's front lawn, when I finally discovered that you were also into this stuff.

I called it, jokingly, egoistic empiricism. Or ironic skepticism. But I would never publish a book with either title. It is fundamentally *personal*. It is "situated." Like every speech act, like every giving of a sign. Of course signs as such *can* be repeated and published far and wide. This gives us the "illusion" of some meaning-juice that is *in the signs themselves*.

In contrast to that "illusion," I point *our* situation. I can chain words together in the hope that I'll come to feel understood. If you chain signs together later and send that chain of signs to me, I may indeed feel understood. But perhaps I don't convince you. Perhaps you find the chain I send either confusing or intelligible enough but wrong or boring. Or wrong *and* boring. Or even offensive, despicable. Of course I wouldn't send the signs I send without the hope that they will increase a sense of friendship between us.

This is where "egoistic" is revealed as a misleading term, except in the sense that one *chooses* one's friend. Perhaps I should have said "anarchic empiricism." As Feuerbach put, though, "the true philosophy is no philosophy." Now the complexity of Feuerbach's speech act deserves attention. Having "no philosophy" does not mean being ignorant of philosophy. I think he means a living continual triumph over dogmatism. To be caught in dogma is to "die" or at least "fall asleep" as a philosopher. Or at least that's *his* notion of a philosopher, which is not so far from Nietzsche's. But I could also mention Whitman or Emerson.

Rorty liked the term "ironism." Which also fits. But any earnestness about the mere label would be a failure of that very "ironism." But only a "sin" in the aesthetic sense. And even whether earnestness is "bad" is relevant to the situation. Now I think of the term "relevantism," as a twist on "relativism." We could also talk about tact or skill or art.

But let's talk about philosophy proper. I like Hegel and Deleuze and Derrida and Plato and Heidegger and Adorno and so on. Lots of the people in this list "oppose" others in the list. They take another great philosopher as foil. More or less earnestly. But, as I see it, the greatness of a philosopher is maybe even measurable in terms of their indestructibility. A "revolutionary" philosopher, entering the scene, has to bunch one of the dead big boys in the nose, to give the ephemeral effect of having slain the great father. The more they succeed, the more they *become* the next great father. Harold Bloom is great on this war for a place in the canon.

But the use of "egoism" is indeed appropriate as I now emphasize a theoretical detachment or transcendence which is ultimately personal. Frankly, I am "faithful" to theory as corrosive. The theoretical gaze is "violent" in its stasis. When philosophers tie themselves to local political causes, this wins them sympathy in the moment. He's really "one of us." The hip young crowd is fascinating. Sartre, with his terrible hygiene, his stinking lecherous breath, funded and seduced young actresses, "corrupted the youth" with his existentialism.

Now this makes Sartre *more* interesting to me. I don't endorse his questionable behavior, or condemn it. That eagerness to point the finger is antithetical to the "violent stasis" of the theoretical gaze. Sartre was a weird man. At his best, he was a first-rate philosopher, which is to say a first rate *poet*. I'm not sure that a clean and innocent alternative Sartre could have managed an equal poetry.

Note that I take Sartre as a character on the stage of history. He is a fellow poet, who was not only good but also hugely recognized. As a father who forced himself into the canon, he was attacked, pushed to the margins. Which is to be expected.

I think poets (philosophers) judge one another *for* their judgments of one another. For instance, if X says that Heidegger is a bag of empty verbiage, then I will judge X to be clueless. But not hopeless. If X is young, X is perhaps just parroting. Which we all do, as far as I know, when we are young. The painful

recognition that we are parroting is part of becoming “old.” So I don’t mean chronological age but exposure age, the time put in to the genre of poetry known as foolosophy.

I’m saying that the philosophy scene is like an art scene or a music scene. The background of such a scene is approximately the entire past. But really only a small part of the past is in focus. One part is valorized. The other part functions as foil. Two sides of one coin. Every hero is “defined” by the dragon to be slain.

I mentioned on that same night my interest in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. Which is maybe more fun to read about than it is to read. But I love that it’s a cosmic wheel, a monomyth. I am “guilty” of “metaphysics” in the sense that yeah I do find enduring structures in existence so far. Is this dogmatism ? I don’t think so. I continue to find the same structures as I continue to find the sunrise or the boiling of water in a pot on the stove.

I enjoy the great anti-philosophers, but I find them a little insincere or unaware on this point. The projection of “wise sayings” is always affirmative. Call it “deconstruction” or “therapy” or whatever. Doesn’t matter. *The words get repeated as important or valuable*. Younger poets adopt and try to mutate and build on what are therefore memes emitted by these philosophers. Who are always “still just philosophers” to the degree that they refer to and analyze the tradition that they predicable claim to surpass and transcend.

Note that I don’t pretend to transcend or surpass philosophy. What I express here is maybe the ancient shadow or margin of philosophy. People like me, who love philosophy but read it “aesthetically” or “ironically” or “personally” are more likely to write novels than manifestos. But I don’t see why a person can’t shift between these modes. A genuine shift would be a transformation of their identity, it seems to me.

So I associate the “ironic” theoretical mode with the “old man.” A grizzled old detective who perhaps *used* to take philosophy “seriously.” Now the ironic old man is still life-and-death se-

rious in some sense. But this old man is like the portrait of the Nazarene painted by Nietzsche in *The Antichrist*. In some important respects. *A faith that does not formulate itself*.

Except as such. Except *as* this skepticism with respect to final formalization. The “truth” is in the “jazz,” though both words are just smoke signals. Attempts to point. To point at what ? An *attitude*. What kind of attitude ? Old as in frail ? No. The reverse. Old as in inoculated. Wise as a serpent. Not so far from Hobbes. The first chapter of *Leviathan* is “Of Man.” This, my friend, is some of my favorite philosophy. Not just the content but the style. Though I might add that content separable from style is a “useful fiction.”

A big theme here is the overcoming of alienation. Of projection. Of “idolatry.” Really it’s the key that opens the door. There is a profanity here as in profanation. I wouldn’t even include this if I didn’t expect you to understand me. Because this key point is also decisive. As in I know it will not compute in the wrong ears. For the still mystified, the demystifying signification is an impiety, a vanity. *Who do you think you are ?* I’m “Emerson” and “Whitman.” As anyone is who understands them. Who “really” understands them.

This fundamental understanding does *not* however make one a great poet, a great philosopher. It may be the understanding that leads to being fully adult. This understanding is probably more important than being a great poet. Could it interfere with being a great poet ? I think it endangers the manic lust for greatness, so maybe. And yet I see it as instilling the courage if not the motive.

I speculate that a certain manic blindness might *help* the poet as poet. The “ironist” has trouble shaking the sense of futility, the sense that it’s all been said. And it’s only poetry, after all. Beyond the basic liberating “thought” — which really has to be assimilated as a way of life — there is a game to play with beautiful concepts. This or that person is “blinded” by the “radiance” of some key word. Maybe “being” or “difference” or “quality” or “truth” or “information.” This word is indeed a

“key.” A strong metaphor, which goes dim until relit.

So this word-as-key is used to illuminate all things. I’ve seen many maniacs come and go on online philosophy forums. Usually they are bad poets, of course. But the mania can grab someone like Nietzsche or Schopenhauer. With both, there is a counterbalancing cunning and sobriety. I speculate that it’s the tension between a manic-dogmatic tendency and a sense of “cool” or irony that results in great work. And also in the structure that we see of the “anti-philosopher” *becoming* the philosopher proper. The slayer of the father becomes a father.

For instance, early Heidegger (more than most people know, I think) is critical and relativistic. He sees how theory fails to even notice life as it “really” is. As we live and suffer and enjoy it. If Heidegger had died young, of the flu or something, he’d have still ended up famous, though not as famous. His brand would be more innocent. I continue to think he’s like a great logical positivist, but in a much more radical way. He makes them look theological. As in theoretical in the pejorative sense. The self-blinding of theory that will not look at the soil that makes it possible. The soil that it returns to.

Later Heidegger is connected to world-historical social hopes. And also to mysticism. An unstable but fascinating blend. I have no problem with the later Heidegger, but maybe there’s a tension in the great professor playing that role.

Which leads us in the question of institutional philosophy. The game of professors. Money, prestige, removal from the rest of the economy to the questionable sacred office. What are philosophers *for* ? Do I read them like Whitman or Emerson ? Or are they physicists in some sense, perhaps of Language and Truth ? Habermas seems to aim at work that justifies the office. In a reasonable way. A sober way. I like Habermas. But his work lacks the personal element. The existential element. Almost methodically so. Worth reading. But far from Sartre. Far even from Hobbes, who hints like Freud at what is dark in us.

Rorty is a tricky one. An institutionalized anti-philosopher. Negative and critical on the surface, but gently progressive, as if designed to appeal to the silent majority of academics who think certain academic “revolutionary” gestures are false. Performative, phony. I’m not against Rorty’s politics. But utopianizing bores me. Another insulated upper middle class so-and-so giving the tired signal. Against a different tired signal, that of the “adolescent” “revolutionary” who finds our very language to be a prison state.

Now maybe it’s a personal quirk, but I’ve never been much impressed by political talk from the podium. I chalk this up to a pre-theoretical realism. Not a mystified metaphysical realism. I just mean a very practical calculative streak that balances out my love of pretty concepts. I think people are selfish, but this self extends to family and friends. A lucky man may be magnanimous, may have a surplus for others. But I think morality with mystification is primarily *not doing* things. Don’t steal. Don’t run people over. And so on. This repression of our anti-social tendencies is the primary achievement. Of course loving your loved ones is positive rather than negative.

The point is that I am skeptical about the transcendence of this fundamental atomism. Communism and fascism both seem to try to promise and then force some extension of the ego to infinity, which just dissolves the ego. If everyone is family, then no one is. Etc. Is this “tragic” ? Sure. That would be part of “empiricism” as a reaction against systematic theodicy.

But please don’t read the above as the imposition of a politics. As in “we should X.” Not at all. Just a message from peer to peer. This peer-to-peer theme is central, even. As in meaning in its vividness is between individuals. When it manages to be. Anyone can parrot sacred sentences. Only dialogue can establish the possession of their “meaning.” But this “meaning” is not immaterial. It is more like comportment. Successful conversation manifests the alignment of vectors. Increases trust. Allows for further illumination. While failed communication either breaks off (ideal) or descends into nastiness. I count it as matura-

tion on my part that I'm more able to simply abandon a lost conversation. Though perhaps a person needs the skill of verbal aggression for those situations where retreat is not possible. I tend to regret it when I descend into that mode.

Big picture. The great philosophers are poets. Their conflict is amusing. They don't really destroy one another but complement and illuminate one another. Anti-philosophy is still philosophy. Negation is still affirmation. The structure shows this. The only way to transcend philosophy is to lose interest in it. To have never met it. To have forgotten it. But I don't see it as something to be avoided in the first place. As others have noted, people who tend to despise philosophy tend to practice it unwittingly at a low level.