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THE SMILE AT THE FOOT OF THE LADDER

> If there's one among you, or among you one,
> who climbed the ladder of his own identity, he
> shook the hand of Mister Agony....
> -A.T Rosen

1.

.... The painful ascent: hands gripping the sides, step after step, not knowing how much further we can go. As if it were indeed some risky venture, on a sheer rock face, that we have foolishly undertaken-perhaps to prove something, or answer someone else's challenge.... But this is just one reading of the poet's words. Better perhaps to set aside the warning, the cautionary note, the metaphor itself, and return to the literal, familiar object. Precisely what you can see for yourself: stored in the garage, or propped against a wall that needs cleaning or painting....

2.

.... Have we moved too quickly here, or in the wrong direction? Perhaps even more than either image or metaphor, our real need is for a concept that the ladder itself involves both the horizontal and the vertical. Something designed a long time ago by someone with a direct, useful task to perform. One that involves both ascending and descending....

3.

.... But of course we have left out something. We have forgotten that we still have a story to tell. One that we have heard, read, or invented, imagined.... Ladder in a romantic novel. He finds one conveniently placed beside the house. And there he goes: in moonlight, or hidden among the dark shadows, up, up, toward the arms of his beloved... Or more seriously, in desperate circumstance, the last chance for escape of the men trapped in the mine....

4.

.... And where out of all this comes the notion of standing at the foot of the ladder, with no inclination, no desire, to ascend? Even if it is only that "one among you" for whom it is enough to feel the earth under his feet.... True he has missed the heights, the excitement of the ascent, the panoramic view of peaks and valleys.... He feels ready to move on; for he has witnessed enough to let him know he has found his rightful place. This must be one of those moments, he tells himself, when one can simply walk past, praising the small beauties of the small world....