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PHOTOGRAPHS BY

RICHARD
AVEDON

COMMENTS BY

TRUMAN
CAPOTE

Observations, Truman Capote

OBSERVATIONS

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Jean Cocteau and André Gide

Mae West

Louis Armstrong

Humphrey Bogart

Ezra Pound

Somerset Maugham

Isak Dinesen

(with Richard Avedon)

1959

RICHARD AVEDON

Richard Avedon is a man with gifted eyes. An adequate description; to add is sheer flourish. His brown and deceptively normal eyes, so energetic at seeing the concealed and seizing the spirit, pursuing the flight of a truth, a mood, a face, are the important features: those, and his born-to-be absorption in his craft, photography, without which the unusual eyes, and the nervously sensitive intelligence supplying their power, could not dispel what they distillingly imbibe. For the truth is, though loquacious, an unskipping conversationalist, the sort that zigzags like a bee ambitious to de-pollen a dozen blossoms simultaneously, Avedon is not, not very, articulate: he finds his proper tongue in silence, and while maneuvering a camera—his voice, the one that speaks with admirable clarity, is the soft sound of the shutter forever freezing a moment focused by his perception.

He was born in New York, and is thirty-six, though one would not think it: a skinny, radiant fellow who still hasn't got his full growth, animated as a colt in Maytime, just a lad not long out of college. Except that he never went to college, never, for that matter, finished high school, even though he appears to have been rather a child prodigy, a poet of some talent, and already, from the time he was ten and the owner of a box camera, sincerely embarked on his life's labor: the walls of his room were ceiling to floor papered with pictures torn from magazines, photographs by Muncaczi and Steichen and Man Ray.

Such interests, special in a child, suggest that he was not only precocious but unhappy; quite happily he says he was: a veteran at running away from home. When he failed to gain a high-school

diploma, his father, sensible man, told him to “Go ahead! Join the army of illiterates.” To be contrary, but not altogether disobedient, he instead joined the Merchant Marine. It was under the auspices of this organization that he encountered his first formal photographic training. Later, after the war, he studied at New York’s New School for Social Research, where Alexey Brodovitch, then Art Director of the magazine Harper’s Bazaar, conducted a renowned class in experimental photography.

A conjunction of worthy teacher with worthy pupil: in 1945, by way of his editorial connection, Brodovitch arranged for the professional debut of his exceptional student. Within the year the novice was established; his work, now regularly appearing in Harper’s Bazaar and Life and Theatre Arts, as well as on the walls of exhibitions, was considerably discussed, praised for its inventive features, its tart insights, the youthful sense of movement and blood-coursing aliveness he could insert in so still an entity as a photograph: simply, no one had seen anything exactly comparable, and so, since he had staying power, was a hard worker, was, to sum it up, seriously gifted, very naturally he evolved to be, during the next decade, the most generously remunerated, by and large successful American photographer of his generation, and the most, as the excessive number of Avedon imitators bears witness, aesthetically influential.

“My first sitter,” so Avedon relates, “was Rachmaninoff. He had an apartment in the building where my grandparents lived. I was about ten, and I used to hide among the garbage cans on his back stairs, stay there hour after hour listening to him practice. One day I thought I must: must ring his bell. I asked could I take his picture with my box camera. In a way, that was the beginning of this book.”

Well, then, this book. It was intended to preserve the best of Avedon's already accomplished work, his observations, along with a few of mine. A final selection of photographs seemed impossible, first because Avedon's portfolio was too richly stocked, secondly because he kept burdening the problem of subtraction by incessantly thinking he must: must hurry off to ring the doorbell of latter-day Rachmaninoffs, persons of interest to him who had by farfetched mishap evaded his ubiquitous lens. Perhaps that implies a connective theme as regards the choice of personalities here included, some private laurel-awarding system based upon esteem for the subject's ability or beauty; but no, in that sense the selection is arbitrary, on the whole the common thread is only that these are some of the people Avedon happens to have photographed, and about whom he has, according to his calculations, made valid comment.

However, he does appear to be attracted over and over again by the mere condition of a face. It will be noticed, for it isn't avoidable, how often he emphasizes the elderly; and, even among the just middle-aged, unrelentingly tracks down every hard-earned crow's-foot. In consequence there have been occasional accusations of malice. But, "Youth never moves me," Avedon explains. "I seldom see anything very beautiful in a young face. I do, though: in the downward curve of Maugham's lips. In Isak Dinesen's hands.

So much has been written there, there is so much to be read, if one could only read. I feel most of the people in this book are earthly saints. Because they are obsessed. Obsessed with work of one sort or another. To dance, to be beautiful, tell stories, solve riddles, perform in the street. Zavattini's mouth and Escudero's eyes, the smile of Marie-Louise Bousquet: they are sermons on bravado."

One afternoon Avedon asked me to his studio, a place ordinarily humming with hot lights and humid models and harried assistants and haranguing telephones; but that afternoon, a winter Sunday, it was a spare and white and peaceful asylum, quiet as the snow-made marks settling like cat's paws on the skylight.

Avedon was in his stocking-feet, wading through a shiny surf of faces, a few laughing and fairly afire with fun and devil-may-care, others straining to communicate the thunder of their interior selves, their art, their inhuman handsomeness, or faces plainly mankindish, or forsaken, or insane: a surfeit of countenances that collided with one's vision and rather stunned it. Like immense playing cards, the faces were placed in rows that spread and filled the studio's vast floor.

It was the final collection of photographs for the book; and as we gingerly paraded through this orchard of prunings, warily walked up and down the rows (always, as though the persons underfoot were capable of crying out, careful not to step on a cheek or squash a nose), Avedon said: "Sometimes I think all my pictures are just pictures of me. My concern is, how would you say, well, the human predicament; only what I consider the human predicament may be simply my own."

He cupped his chin, his gaze darting from Dr. Oppenheimer to Father Darcy: "I hate cameras. They interfere, they're always in the way. I wish: if I just could work with my eyes alone!" Presently he pointed to three prints of the same photograph, a portrait of Louis Armstrong, and asked which I preferred; to me they were triplets until he demonstrated their differences, indicated how one was a degree darker than the other, while from the third a shadow had been removed. "To get a satisfactory print," he said, his voice tight with that intensity perfectionism induces, "one that contains all you intended, is very often more difficult and dangerous than the sitting itself.

When I'm photographing, I immediately know when I've got the image I really want. But to get the image out of the camera and into the open is another matter. I make as many as sixty prints of a picture, would make a hundred if it would mean a fraction's improvement, help show the invisible visible, the inside outside."

We came to the end of the last row, stopped, surveyed the gleaming field of black and white, a harvest fifteen years on the vine. Avedon shrugged. "That's all. That's it. The visual symbols of what I want to tell are in these faces. At least," he added, beginning a genuine frown, the visual symbol of a nature too, in a fortunate sense, vain, too unrequited and questing to ever experience authentic satisfaction, "at least I hope so."

JOHN HUSTON

Of course, at their best, movies are anti-literature and, as a medium, belong not to writers, not to actors, but to directors, some of whom, to be sure—for one, John Huston—served their apprenticeship as studio scribblers. Huston has said: "I became a director because I couldn't watch any longer how my work as a writer was ruined." Though that could not have been the only reason: this lanky, drawling dandy, who might be a cowboy as imagined by Aubrey Beardsley, has in abundance that desire to command Zavattini disavows.

Huston's work and the manner of man he happens to be are inseparably related, his films silhouette the contours of his private

mindscape (as do Eisenstein's, Ingmar Bergman's, Jean Vigo's) in a way not usual to the profession, movies being, the majority of them, objective operations unrevealing of their maker's subjective preoccupations; therefore it is perhaps permissible to mention in personal style Huston's stylized person—his riverboat-gambler's suavity overlaid with roughneck buffooning, the hearty mirthless laughter that rises toward but never reaches his warmly crinkled and ungentle eyes, eyes bored as sunbathing lizards; the determined seduction of his confidential gazes and man's man camaraderie, all intended as much for his own benefit as that of his audience, to camouflage a refrigerated void of active feeling, for, as is true of every classic seducer, or charmer if you prefer, the success of the seduction depends upon himself never feeling, never becoming emotionally inserted: to do so would mean forfeiting control of the situation, the "picture"; thus, he is a man of obsessions rather than passions, and a romantic cynic who believes that all endeavor, virtuous or evil or simply plodding, receives the same honorarium: a check in the amount of zero. What has this to do with his work? Something.

Consider the plot of the first, still best, Huston-directed film, *The Maltese Falcon*, in which the motivation is contributed by a valuable bijou in the shape of a falcon, a treasure for which the principal participants betray each other and murder and die—only to discover the falcon not to be the jeweled and genuine item but a solid lead fake, a cheat. This happens to be the theme, the *dénouement*, of most of Huston's films, of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, in which the prospector's hoard of killed-over gold is blown away by the wind, of *The Asphalt Jungle*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Beat the Devil*, and, of course, of *Moby-Dick*, that deadend statement on man's defeat.

Indeed, Huston seems seldom to have been attracted to material that did not accept human destiny as an unhappy joke, a confidence ploy with no pea under any pod; even the scripts he wrote as a young man—

by example, High Sierra and Juarez—confirm his predilection. Like much art, his art, and he can be an artist when he chooses, is in great degree the compensatory result of a flaw in the man: that emotional lacuna that causes him to see life as a cheat (because the cheater is cheated, too) is the irritant that births the pearl; and his payment has been to be, in human terms, himself something of a Maltese falcon.

CHARLIE CHAPLIN

Shortly before Chaplin departed from America in 1952, a leave-taking of deplorable permanence, he asked Avedon to make his passport portrait, a chore Chaplin proceeded, in the midst of the sitting, to satirize, and the product of his clowning, a horned Pan-sprite mocking the spoilsport universe of governmental borders (in territory and thought), is surely the sort of picture the lovable tramp would have pasted inside his passport: a nice eyebgger for boresome officials. It does amuse to remember the fadeout road of Chaplin's silent days, the empty dusty vista down which, at the end of every adventure, the little bum recedingly sashayed, knapsack aboard: remember, and realize now where the road was awinding: of all places, to Switzerland! and that sorry knapsack, why, it was full of greenbacks! bullion to buy a marbled king-of-the-mountain abode above a lake blue as bluebirds, a Happy Ending bower where the revamped tramp, surrounded by the dotings of a beautiful waif-bride and seven beautiful waif-children, moseys about sniffing his beloved flowers.

Which is as it should be (the person responsible for City Lights, The Gold Rush, Modern Times, creations final and perfect as a lion, as water, is perfectly final, deserves—on this earth here and now—bliss),

and is almost, but isn't: because, in recent years, Chaplin has permitted petulance to absorb him—he believes himself, perhaps rightly, to have been maltreated by America, its press, State Department, and so paces his villa garrulously fuming: which is his privilege, still it is regrettable, for it is wasteful: his last film, *A King in New York*, an irritable poking at things U.S.A., was entirely waste-motion—was, unless it served to drain the gall out of his craw.

Chaplin has had access to genius, and another advantage rarer than that: the benefit of being sole proprietor of his own shop—financier, producer, director, writer, star. One father to a baby is nature's requirement; the necessity of collaborative seeding is the oddity-making curse of film-art, that blasted heath upon which few giants, and as few middling grown men, stride: those who do, all honor to them.

A GATHERING OF SWANS

From the journal of a Mr. Patrick Conway, aged seventeen, during the course of a visit to Bruges in the year 1800: "Sat on the stone wall and observed a gathering of swans, an aloof armada, coast around the curves of the canal and merge with the twilight, their feathers floating away over the water like the trailing hems of snowy ball-gowns. I was reminded of beautiful women; I thought of Mlle. de V., and experienced a cold exquisite spasm, a chill, as though I had heard a poem spoken, fine music rendered. A beautiful woman, beautifully elegant, impresses us as art does, changes the weather of our spirit; and that, is that a frivolous matter? I think not."

The intercontinental covey of swans drifting across our pages boasts a pair of cygnets, fledglings of the prettiest promise who may one day lead the flock. However, as is generally conceded, a beautiful girl of twelve or twenty, while she may merit attention, does not deserve admiration. Reserve that laurel for decades hence when, if she has kept buoyant the weight of her gifts, been faithful to the vows a swan must, she will have earned an audience all-kneeling; for her achievement represents discipline, has required the patience of a hippopotamus, the objectivity of a physician combined with the involvement of an artist, one whose sole creation is her perishable self.

Moreover, the area of accomplishment must extend much beyond the external. Of first importance is voice, its timbre, how and what it pronounces; if stupid, a swan must seek to conceal it, not necessarily from men (a dash of dumbness seldom diminishes masculine respect, though it rarely, regardless of myth, enhances it); rather from clever women, those witch-eyed brilliants who are simultaneously the swan's mortal enemy and most convinced adorer.

Of course the perfect Giselle, she of calmest purity, is herself a clever woman. The cleverest are easily told; and not by any discourse on politics or Proust, any smartly placed banderillas of wit; not, indeed, by the presence of any positive factor, but the absence of one: self-appreciation. The very nature of her attainment presupposes a certain personal absorption; nonetheless, if one can remark on her face or in her attitude an awareness of the impression she makes, it is as though, attending a banquet, one had the misfortune to glimpse the kitchen.

To pedal a realistic chord—and it must be sounded, if only out of justice to their cousins of coarser plumage—authentic swans are almost never women that nature and the world has deprived. God gave them good bones; some lesser personage, a father, a husband, blessed them with

that best of beauty emollients, a splendid bank account. Being a great beauty, and remaining one, is, at the altitude flown here, expensive: a fairly accurate estimate on the annual upkeep could be made—but really, why spark a revolution? And if expenditure were all, a sizable population of sparrows would swiftly be swans.

It may be that the enduring swan glides upon waters of liquefied lucre; but that cannot account for the creature herself—her talent, like all talent, is composed of unpurchasable substances. For a swan is invariably the result of adherence to some aesthetic system of thought, a code transposed into a self-portrait; what we see is the imaginary portrait precisely projected.

This is why certain women, while not truly beautiful but triumphs over plainness, can occasionally provide the swan-illusion: their inner vision of themselves is so fixed, decorated with such clever outer artifice, that we surrender to their claim, even stand convinced of its genuineness: and it is genuine; in a way the manqué swan (our portfolio contains two excellent examples) is more beguiling than the natural (of which, among present company, the classic specimens are Mme. Agnelli, the European swan numero uno, and America's superb unsurpassable Mrs. William S. Paley): after all, a creation wrought by human nature is of subtler human interest, of finer fascination, than one nature alone has evolved.

A final word: the advent of a swan into a room starts stirring in some persons a decided sense of discomfort. If one is to believe these swan "allergics," their hostility does not derive from envy, but, so they suggest, from a shadow of "coldness" and "unreality" the swan casts. Yet isn't it true that an impression of coldness, usually false, accompanies perfection? And might it not be that what the critics actually feel is fear? In the presence of the very beautiful, as in the

presence of the immensely intelligent, terror contributes to our over-all reaction, and it is as much fright as appreciation which causes the stabbed-by-an-icicle chill that for a moment murders us when a swan swims into view.

PABLO PICASSO

In 1981 our world, granted it is still orbiting, will celebrate Picasso's centenary. Of course, because he has that kind of luck, the great man will be on hand; and available, as usual, to all mediums of publicity: very likely on this occasion television will display him in the buff, as befits a god-creature quite beyond the laws of human decorum. Born in Malaga, a country of figs and stone and guitars, Picasso was a child-prodigy who stayed one: that is, remained a prodigy and something of a child, a man inhabited by a boy's fooling-around impatience, hatred of system, fresh-eyed curiosity: "Pablo," to quote his oldest friend, Jaime Sabartes, "is preeminently a sum of curiosities. He has more curiosity than a thousand million women."

When Picasso was thirteen his father, an acrimonious Andalusian art-teacher who ground out greeting-card still lifes for the Barcelona bourgeoisie, gave over to his son his palette and brushes and never painted again; which was, in its way, Picasso's first conquest—he went on to strew the century with painters overshadowed by him or altogether put to pasture. Queer, come to think of it, why some of these fellows have not united to assassinate this octopus of art; for, though not the master of Matisse and unpossessed by Braque's compositional strength, Picasso has, via vivacious gall and a bottomless plethora of inventional surprises, outrun them all: he is the winner.

COCO CHANEL

Chanel, a spare spruce sparrow voluble and vital as a woodpecker, once, midnight in one of her nonstoppable monologues, said, referring to the very costly *pauvre* orphan appearance she has lo these decades modeled: “Cut off my head, and I’m thirteen.” But her head has always remained attached, definitely she had it perfectly placed way back yonder when she was thirteen, or scarcely more, and a moneyed “kind gentleman,” the first of several grateful and well-wishing patrons, asked petite “Coco,” daughter of a Basque blacksmith who had taught her to help him shoe horses, which she preferred, black pearls or white? Neither, she answered—what she preferred, *Chéri*, were the stakings to start a little shop.

Thus emerged Chanel, the fashion-visionary. Whether or not the productions of a dressmaker can be called important “cultural” contributions (and perhaps they can: a Mainbocher, a Balenciaga, are men of more authentic creative significance than several platoons of poets and composers who rise to mind) is uninteresting; but a career woman impure and simple like Chanel arouses a documentary interest, the sum of which is partially totaled in these photographs of her changeling’s face, at one angle a darling dangling in a heart-shaped locket, at another an arid and avid go-getter—observe the striving in the taut stem of her neck: one thinks of a plant, an old hardy perennial still pushing toward, though now a touch parched by, the sun of success that, for those talented inconsolables primed with desire and fueled with ego and whose relentless energy propels the engine that hauls along the lethargic rest of us, invariably flourishes in the frigid sky of

ambition. Chanel lives alone in an apartment across the street from the Ritz.

MARCEL DUCHAMP

Duchamp, born in Rouen, the third son of a multi-membered middle-class family, many of whom were artistically inclined, has lived in New York since 1915. During these forty-four years of American residence he has dabbled away at only one painting (*Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*—an oil, on transparent glass, the size of a church window), and finished none; for all practical purposes, he abandoned painting in 1913, the year his *Nude Descending a Staircase* (of which a contemporary critic remarked, “Whirl around three times, bump your head twice against the wall, and if you bump hard enough the meaning will be perfectly obvious”) was the drunkmaking sensation of some sixteen hundred forerunner experiments on view at the historic Armory show. “But,” protests Duchamp, “not to paint doesn’t mean I’ve given up art.

All good painters have only about five masterpieces to their name. The others are not vital. The five have the force of shock. Shock is good. If I’ve done five good things, it’s enough. Or you might say that instead of dying like Seurat at thirty-one, I am a man whose inspiration for painting stopped, eh?”

His inspiration, at all events his talent, for playing games with art, wherein resides the kindergartenish and nowadays altogether

shockless charm of his paintings, has not lain entirely fallow: in his infinite spare time he has concocted surrealist perfume bottles, made a pioneer abstract film, involved himself in interior decoration (ceilings swathed in coal sacks), devised a portable Duchamp museum fitted with miniatures of his best-known works (also a phial containing "Parisian Air"), and invented for himself other fraudulent forms of art-toy; but what seems to concern him sincerely is chess, a more serious style of fun, a subject around which he has improvised the most recherché volume possible: a thousand copies were printed in three languages, and (hold on to your berets) the title goes *Opposition et Cases Conjuguées*, *Opposition und Schwesterfelder*, *Opposition and Sister Squares*.

Duchamp explains that "It all has to do with blocked pawns, when your only means of winning is by moves of kings. This happens only once in a thousand times. And why," he adds, "why isn't my chess playing an art activity? A chess game is very plastic. You construct it. It's mechanical sculpture and with chess one creates beautiful problems and that beauty is made with the heads and hands. Besides, it's purer, socially, than painting, for you can't make money out of chess, eh?"

And supposing you could, undoubtedly Duchamp wouldn't: he has often expressed anti-lucre sentiments amounting to a financial allergy ("No! Painting shouldn't become a fashionable thing. And money, money, money comes in, and it becomes a Wall Street office"); certainly very little about his living quarters, a fourth-floor walkup in a soiled and sullen brownstone on an unprepossessing Manhattan sidestreet, implies limousine standards; the flat, done up in a sort of flapper-period of modern artiness, boasts nothing rain might harm, except a small Matisse and a large Miró: as a sanctuary, it speaks of a man who would be himself, reasonably free and un beholden. Downstairs, there is on the mailbox a nameplate dingy but dazzling; it reads: "Matisse-Duchamp-Ernst." Because, you see, the present

Madame Duchamp is the former Madame Matisse, wife of the great man's son Pierre; as for Ernst, that is boyishly pink and silvery Surrealist Max, the apartment's onetime tenant. The order of the names, the billing, as it were, seems an appropriate artistic judgment.

JEAN COCTEAU AND ANDRÉ GIDE

André Gide, that moralizing immoralist, a writer favored with sincerity but denied imagination, quite disapproved of Jean Cocteau, whose gifts the mischievous muses had reversed, making of him, both as man and artist, a creature vastly imaginative but vivaciously insincere. It is interesting, then, that Gide should have authored the most accurate, and for that reason most sympathetic, description of our eldest terrible child.

Gide is writing in his journal; the time is August, 1914. "Jean Cocteau had arranged to meet me in an 'English tearoom' on the corner of the rue de Ponthieu and the avenue d'Antin. I had no pleasure in seeing him again, despite his extreme kindness; but he is incapable of seriousness, and all his thoughts, his witticisms, his sensations, all the extraordinary brilliance of his customary conversation shocked me like a luxury article displayed in a period of famine and mourning. He is dressed almost like a soldier, and the fillip of the present events has made him look healthier.

He is relinquishing nothing, but simply giving a martial twist to his usual liveliness. When speaking of the slaughter of Mulhouse he uses amusing adjectives and mimicry; he imitates the bugle call and the whistling of the shrapnel. Then, changing subjects since he sees he is not amusing me, he claims to be sad; he wants to be sad with the same

kind of sadness as you, and suddenly he adopts your mood and explains it to you.

Then he talks of Blanche, mimics Mme. R. and talks of the lady at the Red Cross who shouted on the stairway, 'I was promised fifty wounded men for this morning; I want my fifty wounded men.' Meanwhile he is crushing a piece of plum cake in his plate and nibbling it; his voice rises suddenly and has odd twists; he laughs, leans forward, bends toward you and touches you. The odd thing is that I think he would make a good soldier. He asserts that he would and that he would be brave too. He has the carefree attitude of the street urchin; it is in his company that I feel the most awkward, the most heavy, the most gloomy."

In the spring of 1950, in the piazza of a Sicilian town where Gide was vacationing (it was the last year of his life), he had another meeting with Cocteau, a farewell encounter which the writer of these notes happened to observe. It was Gide's custom to dream away the morning hours propped in the piazza sun; there he sat sipping from a bottle of salt-water brought fresh from the sea, a motionless mandarin shrouded in a woolly wintry black cape and with a wide-brimmed dark fedora casting a shadow the length of his stern, brimstone countenance: an idle idol-saint (of sorts) un-speaking and unspoken to except for occasional consultations with those of the village Ganymedes who snagged his fancy.

Then one morning Cocteau, whirling a cane, sauntered upon the piazza-scene and proceeded to interrupt the steely-eyed reveries of Il Vecchio (as the local ragazzi called the distinguished octogenarian). Thirty-five years had gone by since the wartime tea party, yet nothing in the attitude of the two men toward each other had altered. Cocteau was still anxious to please, still the rainbow-winged and dancing dragonfly inviting the toad not merely to admire but perhaps devour him.

He jiggled about, his jingling merriment competed with the bell-music of passing donkey carts, he scattered rays of bitter wit that stung like the Sicilian sun, he effused, enthused, he fondled the old man's knee, caressed his hands, squeezed his shoulders, kissed his parched Mongolian cheeks—nay, nothing would awaken Il Vecchio: as though his stomach turned at the thought of digesting such fancy-colored fodder, he remained a hungerless frog upon a thorny frond; until at last he croaked, “Do be still. You are disturbing the view.”

Very true: Cocteau was disturbing the view. He has been doing so since his debut as an opium-smoking prodigy of seventeen. For more than four decades this eternal gamin has conducted a fun-for-all vaudeville, with many flashing changes of attire: poet, novelist, playwright, journalist, designer, painter, inventor of ballets, film maker, professional conversationalist. Most of these costumes have fit well, a few brilliantly.

But it is in the guise of catalytic agent that he has been most capable: as an innovator for, and propagandist of, other men's ideas and gifts—from Radiguet to Genet, Satie to Auric, Picasso to Bérard, Worth to Dior. Cocteau has lived absolutely inside his time, and more than anyone else, formed French taste in the present century. It is Cocteau's kinship with his own epoch, his exclusive concern with the modern, that lay at the root of Il Vecchio's aversion. “I do not seek to be of my epoch; I seek to overflow my epoch” was Gide's declared ambition; a commendable one, too. But isn't it possible that a man who has so enlivened our today will, if not overflow, at least trickle into somebody's tomorrow?

MAE WEST

Once upon a time an outrageous young man of wide acquaintance thought to give an unusual tea party. It was to honor Miss Mae West, then appearing in a Manhattan night club. Dame Edith Sitwell was invited to pour, a task the Dame, always a devotee of outré incident, accepted. New York illuminati, titillated at the prospect of an interview between two ladies of such differently composed distinction, begged bids.

“My dear,” the young man was congratulated in advance, “it’s the camp of the season.”

But—everything went awry. At four the Dame, pleading laryngitis, telephoned her regrets. By six, with the party at midpoint, it seemed Miss West would disappoint, too. Muttering guests mentioned hoax; at seven the host retired to a private chamber. Ten minutes later the guest of honor arrived, and what remained of the assemblage were not sorry they had waited. Not sorry, but strangely confused. The familiar appurtenances were there: the brass wig, the scimitar eyes with sword-length lashes, the white skin, white as a cottonmouth’s mouth, the shape, that Big Ben of hour-glass figures, that convict’s dream—nothing was absent; except Miss West.

For surely this was not the real Mae. Yet it was indeed Miss West: an uneasy, a shy and vulnerable, an unclassifiably virginal woman whose tardy entrance was conceivably due to having lingered on the street before summoning the courage to ring the bell. As one watched her, a jittery moth of a smile leaping about her lips but never alighting, huskily whisper “Sopleastameetya,” and, as though too bashful to proceed, at once abandon her seat on the seesaw of any potential conversation, the tour de force nature of her theater-self, its eerie and absolute

completeness, struck with force. Removed from the protecting realm of her hilarious creation, her sexless symbol of uninhibited sexuality, she was without defense: her long lashes fluttered like the feelers of a beetle on its back.

Only once did the tougher Mae reveal herself. The display was occasioned by an intense young girl who, approaching the actress, announced, "I saw Diamond Lil last week; it was wonderful."

"Didja, honey? Wheredja see it?"

"At the Museum. The Modern Museum."

And a dismayed Miss West, seeking shelter in the sassy drawl of her famous fabrication, inquired, "Just whaddya mean, honey? A museum?"

LOUIS ARMSTRONG

Surely the Satch has forgotten, still, he was one of this writer's first friends, I met him when I was four, that would be around 1928, and he, a hard-plump and belligerently happy brown Buddha, was playing aboard a pleasure steamer that paddled between New Orleans and St. Louis. Never mind why, but I had occasion to take the trip very often, and for me the sweet anger of Armstrong's trumpet, the froggy exuberance of his come-to-me-baby mouthings, are a piece of Proust's madeleine cake: they make Mississippi moons rise again, summon the muddy lights of river towns, the sound, like an alligator's yawn, of river horns—I hear the rush of the mulatto river pushing by, hear, always, stomp! stomp! the beat of the grinning Buddha's foot as he shouts his way into "Sunny Side of the Street" and the honeymooning dancers, dazed with bootleg brew and sweating through their talcum, bunny-hug around the ship's saloony ballroom.

The Satch, he was good to me, he told me I had talent, that I ought to be in vaudeville; he gave me a bamboo cane and a straw boater with a peppermint headband; and every night from the stand announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, now we're going to present you one of America's nice kids, he's going to do a little tap dance." Afterward I passed among the passengers, collecting in my hat nickels and dimes. This went on all summer, I grew rich and vain; but in October the river roughened, the moon whitened, the customers lessened, the boat rides ended, and with them my career. Six years later, while living at a boarding school from which I wanted to run away, I wrote my former, now famous, benefactor, and said if I came to New York, couldn't he get me a job at the Cotton Club or somewhere? There was no reply, maybe he never got the letter, it doesn't matter, I still loved him, still do.

HUMPHREY BOGART

If one listens attentively to any man's vocabulary, it will be noticed that certain key-to-character words recur. With Bogart, whose pungent personal thesaurus was by and large unspeakably unprintable, "bum" and "professional" were two such verbal signposts. A most moral—by a bit exaggerating you might say "prim"—man, he employed "professional" as a platinum medal to be distributed among persons whose behavior he sanctioned; "bum," the reverse of an accolade, conveyed, when spoken by him, almost scarifying displeasure. "My old man," he once remarked of his father, who had been a reputable New York doctor, "died ten thousand dollars in debt, and I had to pay off every cent. A guy who doesn't leave his wife and kids provided for, he's a bum."

Bums, too, were guys who cheated on their wives, cheated on their taxes, and all whiners, gossipists, most politicians, most writers, women who Drank, women who were scornful of men who Drank; but the bum true-blue was any fellow who shirked his job, was not, in meticulous style, a “pro” in his work. God knows he was. Never mind that he might play poker until dawn and swallow a brandy for breakfast; he was always on time on the set, in make-up and letter-perfect in his part (forever the same part, to be sure, still there is nothing more difficult to interestingly sustain than repetition). No, there was never a mite of bum-hokum about Bogart; he was an actor without theories (well, one: that he should be highly paid), without temper but not without temperament; and because he understood that discipline was the better part of artistic survival, he lasted, he left his mark.

EZRA POUND

Born 1885, an Idaho boy. Taught school; was tossed out for being “too much the Latin Quarter type.” Soon sought solace amid similar souls abroad. Aged twenty-three, while starving himself fat on a potato diet in Venice, he published *A Lume Spento*, a first book of poems which instigated a fierce friendship with Yeats, who wrote of him: “A rugged and headstrong nature and he is always hurting people’s feelings, but he has I think some genius and great goodwill.” Goodwill: to say it slightly!—between 1909 and 1920, while living first in London, then Paris, he steadily championed the careers of others (it was to Pound that Eliot dedicated *The Waste Land*; it was Pound who raised the money that enabled Joyce to complete *Ulysses*).

His generosity in this sphere is a matter on which even Hemingway, who does not often celebrate the kindness of others, has offered testimony: "So then, so far," he wrote, writing in 1925, "we have Pound the major poet devoting, say, one fifth of his time to his poetry. With the rest of his time he tries to advance the fortunes, both material and artistic, of his friends. He defends them when they are attacked, he gets them into magazines and out of jail. He loans them money. He sells their pictures. He arranges concerts for them. He writes articles about them. He introduces them to wealthy women. He gets publishers to take their books. He sits up all night with them when they claim to be dying and witnesses their wills. He advances them hospital expenses and dissuades them from suicide. And in the end a few of them refrain from knifing at the first opportunity."

Nevertheless, he managed to regularly issue pamphlets, roar out his Cantos ("the epic of the farings of a literary mind," so Marianne Moore, evidencing her customary exactness, defined them) and to give both sculpture and painting a serious if unavailing try. But it was the study of economics that became increasingly his intensest interest ("History that omits economics is sheer bunk"); he developed odd notions on the subject, and some of them led to his ruin: in 1939, by now a long-term mussolinized Italophile, he began broadcasting via Rome radio a sequence of fascist-tempered discourses which culminated in his being indicted as an American traitor; units of the American army advancing into Italy caught up with him in 1945. For several weeks, like a zoo-beast mangy and rabid, he was imprisoned in an open-air cage at Pisa. Some months later, on the eve of his treason trial, he was declared insane, as might be any poet in his right artistic mind; and so he spent the next twelve years sealed away in the District of Columbia's St. Elizabeths Hospital. While there, he published *The Pisan Cantos* and won the Bollingen Prize, an award excessively censured in dough-headed circles.

However, one rainy Washington April day in 1958, Pound, an old man of seventy-two, his once flaming beard gone ashen and his satyr-saint's face scribbled with lines that spelled out a disconsolate tale, stood before a certain Judge Bolitha J. Laws and heard himself declared "incurably insane." Incurable, but "harmless" enough to go free. Whereupon Pound announced, "Any man who could live in America is insane," and prepared to depart for Italy.

Photographs were taken of him a few days before he sailed. Arrogant, mocking, his eyes squeezed shut as he burst into snatches of senseless song, he strode back and forth, as though still pacing a Pisan cage; or, rather, a cage that had become life itself.

SOMERSET MAUGHAM

Says young and opinionated Holden Caulfield, the Huckleberry Finn of upper Park Avenue who narrates J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*: "What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. You take that book 'Of Human Bondage' by Somerset Maugham—I wouldn't want to call Somerset Maugham up. I don't know. He just isn't the kind of guy I'd want to call up, that's all. I'd rather call old Thomas Hardy up. I like that Eustacia Vye."

Well, old Holden has a point—but he misses it: Mr. Maugham doesn't wish to be phoned, he wants to be read; though his prose is rebuffingly

impersonal, too clear and sensible to generate audience-affection, he achieves his intention: quite recently a team of auditors estimated that for every minute of every hour he earns in royalties thirty-two dollars. Which doesn't mean he's any good; but he is. If Holden were a novice author, it would be well worth his while to ring up the old boy, he might learn a lot, for few have kept the foxy rules of story making in severer focus, and it is advisable to know those rules, especially if, like most novices, you mean to dismantle them.

Over the past twenty years, Mr. Maugham has made more farewell appearances than Sir Harry Lauder: each new book is announced as his swan song contribution; and today, aged eighty-five, he constantly threatens to embark on the last and most distinguished of experiences. If he must make the journey, then all we can do is gather at the dock and, grateful for the pleasure he has given us, bid him a fond bon voyage.

ISAK DINESEN

Rungsted is a sea town on the coast road between Copenhagen and Elsinore. Among eighteenth-century travelers the otherwise undistinguished village was well known for the handsomeness of its Inn. The Inn, though it no longer obliges coachmen and their passengers, is still renowned: as the home of Rungsted's first citizen, the Baroness Blixen, alias Isak Dinesen, alias Pierre Andrezel.

The Baroness, weighing a handful of feathers and fragile as a coquillage bouquet, entertains callers in a sparse, sparkling parlor sprinkled with

sleeping dogs and warmed by a fireplace and a porcelain stove: a room where she, an imposing creation come forward from one of her own Gothic tales, sits bundled in bristling wolfskins and British tweeds, her feet fur-booted, her legs, thin as the thighs of an ortolan, encased in woolen hose, and her neck, round which a ring could fit, looped with frail lilac scarves.

Time has refined her, this legend who has lived the adventures of an iron-nerved man: shot charging lions and infuriated buffalo, worked an African farm, flown over Kilimanjaro in the perilous first planes, doctored the Masai; time has reduced her to an essence, as a grape can become a raisin, roses an attar. Quite instantly, even if one were deprived of knowing her dossier, she registers as *la vraie chose*, a true somebody. A face so faceted, its prisms tossing a proud glitter of intelligence and educated compassion, which is to say wisdom, cannot be an accidental occurrence; nor do such eyes, smudges of kohl darkening the lids, deeply set, like velvet animals burrowed in a cave, fall into the possession of ordinary women.

If a visitor is invited to tea, the Baroness serves a very high one: sherry before, afterward a jamboree of toast and varied marmalades, cold pâtés, grilled livers, orange-flavored crêpes. But the hostess cannot partake, she is unwell, she eats nothing, nothing at all, oh, perhaps an oyster, one strawberry, a glass of champagne. Instead, she talks; and like most artists, certainly all old beauties, she is sufficiently self-centered to enjoy herself as conversational subject.

Her lips, just touched with paint, twist in a sideways smile of rather paralytic contour, and speaking an English brushed with British inflections, she might say, "Ah, well, yes, what a lot of stories this old Inn could tell. It belonged to my brother, I bought it from him; Last Tales paid the last installment. Now it is mine, absolutely. I have plans

for it after I die. It will be an aviary, the grounds, the park, will be a bird sanctuary. All the years in Africa, when I had my highland farm, I never imagined to make my home again in Denmark. When I knew, was certain, the farm was slipping away, saw I'd lost it, that is when I began writing my stories: to forget the unendurable. During the war, too; the house was a way station for Jews escaping to Sweden. Jews in the kitchen and Nazis in the garden.

I had to write to save my mind, I wrote *The Angelic Avengers*, which was not a political parable, though it amused me how many decided it to be so. Extraordinary men, the Nazis. I often argued with them, spoke back very sharply. Oh, don't think I mean to seem brave, I risked nothing; they were such a masculine society, they simply didn't care what a woman thought. Another muffin? Please do. I enjoy dining vicariously. I waited for the postman today; I'd hoped he'd bring a new parcel of books.

I read so quickly, it's difficult to keep me supplied. What I ask of art is air, an atmosphere. That is very meager on the menu nowadays. I never weary of books that I like, I can read them twenty times—can, and have. *King Lear*. I always judge a person by what he thinks of *King Lear*. Of course, one does want a new page; a different face. I have a talent for friendship, friends are what I have enjoyed most: to stir, to get about, to meet new people and attach them.”

Periodically the Baroness does stir. Leaning on the affectionate arm of forlornly cheerful Miss Clara Svendsen, her long-in-service secretary-companion (“Dear Clara. Originally I hired her as a cook. After three wretched meals I accused her, ‘My dear, you are an imposter. Speak the truth!’ She wept, and told me she was a schoolteacher from the north of Denmark who loved my books. One day she'd seen an advertisement I'd placed for a kitchen wench. So she came; and she

wanted to stay. Since she couldn't cook, we arranged she should be secretary. I regret the decision exceedingly. Clara is an appalling tyrant"), she sets forth for Rome or London, going usually by ship ("One does not travel in a plane; one is merely sent, like a parcel").

Last January, the winter of 1959, she made her initial visit to America, a country to which she is grateful because it provided the first publisher and audience for her work. Her reception was comparable to Jenny Lind; at least out-distanced anything accorded a literary dignitary since Dickens and Shaw. She was televised and Lifeized, the one public "reading" for which she was scheduled developed into a marathon of ticket-scalper, standing-ovation events, and no one, heaven knows, has ever been guest of honor at so numbing a number of parties ("It was delicious. New York: ah! That is where things are happening! Lunches and dinners, champagne, champagne; everyone was too kind. I arrived weighing sixty-five pounds and came home an even fifty-three; the doctors didn't know why I was alive, they insisted I ought to be dead, but oh, I've known that for years, Death is my oldest flirt. No, we lived, and Clara—Clara gained a stone").

Her acceptance of immense age and its consequences is not stoically final; notes of healthy hope intrude: "I want to finish a book, I want to see next summer's fruit, and Rome again, Gielgud at Stratford, perhaps America. If only. Why am I so weak?" she asks, twitching at her lilac scarves with a brown bony hand; and the question, accompanied by the chimings of a mantel clock and a murmur from Miss Svendsen, invites the guest to depart, permitting the Baroness to doze on a couch next to the fire.

As the visitor goes he may be presented a copy of her favorite of her books ("Because it is about real things"), the beautiful *Out of Africa*. A souvenir inscribed "Je repondrai—Karen Blixen."

“Je repondrai,” she explains, standing at the door and, in farewell, offering her cheek to be kissed, “I answer—a lovely motto. I borrowed it from the Finch-Hatton family. I like it because I believe every one of us has an answer in him.”

Her own answer has been a yes to life, an affirmation her art echoes with an echo that will echo.

The End