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## East-West Meeting

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## EAST-WEST MEETING

When John Haines kindly invited me to come to Missoula in April of this year to deliver the lead-off talk at a conference on the relation of the writer to his community, I accepted with several kinds of trepidation. One of them, which developed on the way from Boston, was a well-founded fear that the airline wouldn't get me there on time. (It almost didn't, thanks to the fact that our plane, loaded to the doors, got pinned down in Butte by a strong tailwind. When, after waiting a half hour, the pilot finally decided to risk a takeoff, we just did clear the last marking-strips on the runway. At that point I was wondering if the airline would get me there at all. An hour or so later, in Missoula, as I started my talk, the alarms were still going off in my nervous system, which probably made my opening remarks energetic if not particularly coherent.)

My main misgivings concerned the meeting itself. I had heard and read about the disagreeableness that often sets in when literary people get together. I had, in fact, seen much the same thing, although in colder form, at many scientific meetings. And as a scientific type myself, I wondered how I might be received, the sciences being even more suspect now than they were when C. P. Snow first wrote about the Two Cultures. Had I known, moreover, the remarkable variety of writers who would be coming, I'd have been uneasier still.

But for a miracle, it all worked out. From Ishmael Reed's witty fancies, Hjorstberg's incredibly fluent satire, or Paul Krassner's *shticks*, to the poetry readings by Tess Gallagher and Madeline DeFrees, or the readings by various regional novelists on the last night, there was a kind of coherence to the proceedings, and on the whole, great openness and good will. I doubt very much that things would have gone that way had the same people met back East. The genius of place is, I believe, a reality, and in this case may have made the difference.

The trouble with intellectuals on the East Coast is the obsession we have with never slipping up—never being caught in a naive thought or an emotion which might be considered silly or old hat. This is one reason, perhaps, aside from the cost of living, that younger writers

seem to have been gravitating to the West. It is significant that years ago Theodore Roethke left Bennington for Washington, and that poets such as John Haines, although published in the East, have no great urge to come here.

It was the opposite in my youth. One of the standing jokes at Ann Arbor, Roethke's alma mater, was that at commencement, there was a line of buses waiting outside to take the graduating class to New York. Manhattan was where it all was. For painters, that is still true. Even Boston is drained of them. And in proportion as New York has displaced Paris as the world capital for painting, painting itself has evaporated into modishness, a quirky sophistication that makes stripes the "in" thing one minute and splotches or who knows what, the vogue next.\*

What we back here, New Yorkers in particular, do not realize is our naivete' in trying always to appear sophisticated. For one thing, if you live in a place like Manhattan, you almost automatically *are* sophisticated; for another, that may help you to get published, but may also ruin what real gifts you have. The reason is that sophistication is simply a better-educated form of what the man-in-the-street used to call savvy; it is *knowingness*, formularized knowledge. What makes it seem freer and more spontaneous than it really is is that part of the formula is to be cynical, to deal offhandedly with things that simpler people treat with respect.

Sophistication, one might say, is a specialty of insiders—is what men of the world agree goes without saying. And what goes without saying all too often goes without thinking. The new recruit is as apt to pick up his ideas by imitation, as by concluding for himself what he should doubt and deride in the world around him. He has some precedent in the fact that the modern sciences appear to present him, readymade, a variety of reasons for believing in next to nothing. And in that, of course, he is wrong.

For science, as scientists themselves insist, has nothing to tell us about ultimate meanings; it only tells us something about how things work. The fact that lovemaking depends upon endocrine secretions and "pleasure" centers in the brain as well as upon the more familiar external apparatus, has somehow become an excuse for demoting love to sex. And with that the intangible or purely psychic aspect of

\* It is interesting that this movement appeared to begin in post WW II Paris with American expatriates such as Nikki Saint-Phalle.

the erotic—love as it began to exist in the days of the troubadours—is being talked out of existence again in this century. It is absurd that a slightly improved knowledge of physiology should have that effect.

But that is how sophistication works. It is the attitude of men who, before all else, never want to be caught making fools of themselves; and so naive are they in that particular form of vanity, that they will go to any lengths to protect it—will stunt their feelings and constrict their imaginations, cultivate what they consider rational prejudices and live lives of a most suffocating self-indulgence.

Much modern poetry, I think, suffers from this sort of urban closed-mindedness. What poet, for instance, has been struck by the strange marvels in the universe revealed by astronomy—by Cygnus X-1, the star being slowly swallowed up by its invisible companion, the Black Hole from which even light cannot escape?

We are surrounded, in short, by wonders, of a kind and on a scale beyond anything our forebears dreamt of, and yet make little use of them, the reason being that, transposed from science or philosophy into literature, skepticism has tended to become pure destructiveness. One can attribute this phenomenon, in part, to our ignorance of history. We seem unaware that the mania for sophistication, for knowing the very latest in what not to believe, is a recurrent social disorder, and most of the civilizations in which it reached the epidemic stage were made sterile by it. We commemorate that fact in a word—Alexandrianism—without apparently ever thinking out what it means. The Alexandrians were sophisticated; they played games—writing poems for instance in the shape of trees—the way Larry Rivers and Andy Warhol play art games, the way Gertrude Stein, the Great Mistress of Camp, played word games.

As the stepchild of skeptical materialism, the writer-sophisticate has two ways to go. He can become a camp tragedian à la Beckett or use the more straight approach of writers such as Susan Sontag. Beckett's technique is a kind of double mockery. He mocks existence and at the same time (in plays like *Waiting for Godot* or *Krapp's Last Tape*) baits his audience, by being deliberately maddeningly boring. (The Dadaists, of course, anticipated him in this. At their meetings in post-war I Paris, they used to stun their audiences with boredom by giving nonstop readings from old newspapers or from the Paris phonebook).

The more straight approach, typified by much of the writing in *The*

*New York Review of Books*, relies heavily on the doctrinaire use of Received Opinion, particularly as derived from Freud or Marx or that strangely illiberal body of ideas that has given liberalism its present bad name. To pick faults, to dogmatize, to display in depth the authorities one is familiar with, may make for dreary reading, but it protects one professionally. However dull and ugly one's work, it still meets the main requirement; it isn't naive.

In this accentuation of the negative the New York writer frequently includes himself. When Susan Sontag, in an interview with the Harvard University Gazette (April 19, 1975), said that "'of art's basic capital'. . .she works 'with a fundamental cesspool of obsessions' which she guessed every artist works with" I felt I couldn't have put it better. If you unscramble the metaphor, it's even orthodox Freud ("art's basic capital" = "cesspool"; or art = money = shit).\*

I was reminded of New York and Ms Sontag again this April when John Haines showed me some of the stunning photographs he had taken of the Alaskan landscape during his homesteading days up there. In her articles on photography in *The New York Review*, Ms S first classified the photographer as another "anal" type, who wanted to own the past by freezing it into pictures. The trade jargon reveals other unpleasant things about him too. He "shoots" his subjects and is also (have you guessed?) a Peeping Tom who gets his kicks by invading others' privacy.

As an ex-New Yorker myself, always mindful of Received Opinion, however threadbare, I tried applying Ms Sontag's ideas to John's pictures. Was he really just spying on the mountains and the snow, or trying, by capturing them on film, to make them his own forever? Not that there aren't photographers, probably, who do work that way. One thinks of urban photojournalists in particular. But is that what photography as an art boils down to—another "fundamental cesspool of obsessions"? Apart from the sublimation of essentially sordid

\*Orthodox Freudianism equated money, the money-making type, with "anal"—i.e. the retention of feces. For the same reason very rich men tend to be collectors. A German slang expression, describing someone very rich, says "He shits gold"; and in the German folk-tale, the enchanted money or Devil's Gold found in the woods turns to shit.

motives, is there no such thing as the aesthetic? Can we never simply love The Other or the world, each for its own sake, without strings?

That actually is the issue—the possibility of a love which has no ulterior motives. In my opinion that's what aesthetics *is*. The struggle of the artist is not to express his biases but to absorb and go beyond them—to achieve something like clear sight and through that, something like humanity—the forgotten Christian ideal of being which said: Understand the world for what it is, and love and forgive it nonetheless, and all will open unto you.

It is exactly that spirit of open imaginativeness that I feel is dead on the East Coast. We have killed it with Freud and ethology and our devouring success ethic. At the meeting in Missoula, that same spirit, although often inchoate and perhaps ashamed of itself, dreading to appear “naive”, was nevertheless there, still alive. The audiences were eager to listen, forgiving of what they heard—not that forgiveness in the usual sense was often necessary—and the people on the platform, for all their diversity, seemed to reciprocate. Under other circumstances there might have been much backbiting among them. In this case, there appeared to be very little; we got along surprisingly well. The genius of place prevailed.

On the plane going home, talking with Tess Gallagher (who is herself a native of Seattle) I wondered if the West wasn't even yet the escape-valve and hope of the Union, a frontier now in another less material sense. I thought of the people I'd met, like Tess and Dan Tabish and Jim Welch, and found my habitual pessimism giving way to something else. I remembered how John Haines and Gala, one of his students, had come to see me off, so warmly—so unlike the way I had left dozens of scientific meetings in the past. And reluctantly, an ex-New Yorker still, I recognized the emotion I was feeling. It was—do I dare be that naive?—love.