

CARL HANCOCK RUX

EAVESDROPPING ON A CYCLICAL CONVERSATION

Scene: a dinner party in the sitting room of a mansion in ruins, furnished with the aesthetic of abandonment in relation to decay. The walls are covered in nineteenth-century, persimmon-colored Brunschwig & Fils wallpaper: a botanical composition, flamboyant, peeling and watermarked, with leaves and a blackish background. The room itself is dominated by red-lacquered doors stenciled with Moorish Arabesque patterns and embellished with Chinese porcelains mounted with Parisian gilt bronze (*ormolu*) in neoclassical taste, late eighteenth century. Italian carved marble, slate and malachite nineteenth-century busts of blackamoors flank the hearth of a garish rococo fireplace. Leather-bound books crowd the floor. The guests sit about a roaring fire on low cushioned chairs.

JAMES BALDWIN (*Hoping to spark interesting conversation*)

I want to be an honest man and a good writer.

ANTON CHEKHOV (*to Baldwin*)

Write only of what is important and eternal.

HANNAH ARENDT (*to Chekhov*)

Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.

LUIGI PIRANDELLO (*to Baldwin*)

The man, the writer, the instrument of the creation will die, but his creation does not die.

VIRGINIA WOOLF (*to the room*)

To write weekly, to write daily, to write shortly, to write for busy people catching trains in the morning or for tired people coming home in the evening, is a heartbreaking task for men who know good writing from bad. They do it, but instinctively draw out of harm's way anything precious that might be damaged by contact with the public, or anything sharp that might irritate its skin. (*an uncomfortable silence*)

BALDWIN (*retrieving the dignity of the room from its doldrums*)

Any writer, I suppose, feels that the world into which he was born is nothing less than a conspiracy against the cultivation of his talent.

RANDOLPH S. BOURNE (*intrigued by Baldwin's statement*)

History remembers only the brilliant failures and the brilliant successes.

CHARLES SEIGNOBOS (*slightly disagreeing*)

History is not a science; it is a method.

NAPOLEAN (*emphatically disagreeing*)

History is a myth that men agree to believe!

JAKOB BURCKHARDT

History is still in large measure poetry to me.

NAPOLEAN (*still too emphatic*)

History is the invention of historians!

BALDWIN (*trying to restore dignity to the room once again*)

Trust life, and it will teach you, in joy and sorrow, all you need to know.

HEGEL (*refreshing everyone's glass*)

We do not need to be shoemakers to know if our shoes fit . . . or professionals to acquire knowledge of matters of universal interest.

BALDWIN (*catching himself in the mirror, eyes wet and glassy*)

You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read.

HARRY TRUMAN

It's what you learn after you know it all that counts.

HEGEL

The learner always begins by finding fault, but the scholar sees the positive merit in everything.

BALDWIN (*unlit cigarette in his mouth, searching his breast pockets for a lighter*)

A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled.

WILLIAM ADAMS (*lighting Baldwin's cigarette*)

My father taught me to work. He did *not* teach me to love it.

HEGEL (*bored with the conversation, flipping through a book plucked from a library shelf*)

There is no proposition of Heraclitus which I have *not* adopted in my logic. . . the least of which is that children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.

JAMES BALDWIN (*turning to Hegel, eyes widening, words coming in rapid succession*)

It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.

ALVIN TOFFLER (*throwing his wine glass to the floor*)

The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

OSCAR WILDE (*plucking a flower from a table arrangement, pinning it to his coat's lapel*)

Everybody who is incapable of learning has taken to teaching.

EARTHA KITT (*making her entrance late, a fur draped about her shoulders.*)

I am learning all the time!

(*She plucks the flower from Wilde's lapel and tosses it into the fire*)

The tombstone will be my diploma!

BLACKOUT