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First I must apologize for two things; for the way in which you are anonymized in my title, and then for the appellation "man of letters," which usually suggests the starch of over-respectability or an excessively indiscriminate powdering of academic approval, neither of which I intend.

As to the note of anonymity: though I spent a few days with you recently, when we were thrown together by circumstances neither of us could avoid, what we accidentally exchanged then did not seem to be sufficiently stamped with the uniqueness of personal opinion to warrant so intimate a form of address as your name here would imply. Further, and perhaps more to the point, it struck me after you left that a good deal of what you had to say, both publicly in lectures, and privately to me, reflected an attitude more general than personal, and one with which I had already come, both sympathetically and exasperatedly, to identify with other European writers I have met. It seems fairer, therefore, and less restricting to my purpose, to consider your remarks for their typicality than to delineate them under a name with which they can only be partially and perhaps not quite so meaningfully connected.

I do not find myself apologizing for using the term "European," though I do wish there were a better one than "man of letters" (litterateur is even more odious!) to complete the description. Though you pride yourself on your insular nationality, you have lived many years in various European countries.
where your name is perhaps as well known as in your own land. You have a considerable reputation as a poet in all of Europe and America, and you have also written drama, fiction, and books of social and literary commentary. The most important of these are seriously concerned with political and cultural matters. Yours is the tradition of the great European poets and humanists, and one which I deeply respect. It is not necessarily, if at all, the tradition of American writers and teachers. Which brings me to my point.

We in America are "writers" and/or "teachers" first; "poets" (novelists, critics, biographers) and "humanists"—with the appropriate and insistent reservations always made—only later. Walt Whitman is the only man who is universally called "poet" here without a snicker. The rest were and still are "brain trusters," "mad geniuses," "drunkards," and "screwballs." Where it began or when, I don't know. With Poe weaving down the streets of Baltimore? With Hawthorne writing brittle allegories in an attic? With Brook Farm? With Thoreau showing the world a thing or two alone at Walden? With Melville in a customs house mumbling away the best years of his life? Whitman somehow got away with it: he had a love-like beard and school children were reminded of Moses or God. He wrote "Captain, My Captain!" about Lincoln, and "Song of Myself," all about himself. He has always embarrassed us, but in college the professors get around it all by making us read dissertations and contemporary opinions about him, proving why he was such a good American. School children, of course, still recite him, and below graduate school level he is still read as a poet. That means that in most places in America you can safely put Leaves of Grass beside the Bible and the porcelain pincushion on the bookshelf.

The intellectuals here are perplexed by Whitman: not only by his illiterate appeal, but by the fact that together with Poe
he is still one of the most widely respected American poets abroad. Of course, if it were not for Poe's drunkenness, he too could be called a poet here without a snicker. His name itself shows how close he came to making it. But the man who wrote "The Raven" is not always identified with the mystery story writer who wrote "The Gold Bug" or "The Fall of the House of Usher"—Poe is read, as a double man, almost as much, if not as much, as Whitman; but he had a weak chin and looked like a villain, and worst of all, he drank (critics and biographers still apologize). So, of course, if we call him poet, we must wink or snicker.

And so you say that the trouble with American poetry is that it is too self-conscious, too specialized, too isolated from the lives of people; that it is written by university teachers, insurance men, medical doctors, spinsters, shoe clerks, and drunkards. At any rate, by amateurs. Then, on the other hand, and seeming to excuse American poetry, you say that the people here are not mentalized enough, that the landscape is too gigantic, too various to be understood, that topographically, deserts and tremendous mountain ranges, badlands and congested cities offer none of the spiritual assurances which vineyards, for instance, have always given to poets. (The only Americans you can appreciate are T. S. Eliot and Henry James, whom you question as "Americans." In this way your opinion is very much like a good many literary Americans' with "non-American" tastes.) Is there any hope for American letters? Yes, but not immediately perhaps. In three or four hundred years—perhaps: with a changed and more intimate topography, with several hundred million American skeletons insulating and enriching the earth, with a wider and more personal history of deprivation and suffering, with a sense of being able to die meaningfully for ideals as immediate as a new Ford, though more intrinsic to human dignity than that. In other words, we have, as Matthew Arnold
and any number of seasoned European men of letters visiting America during the past 175 years were impelled to observe, a long way to go.

Finally, you say, in all fairness to America, that Europe today is decadent, though not necessarily physically: it has lost the vigor of the old ideals and is eating its own entrails, spiritually and psychologically. The muscular energy towards which it looks admiringly is displayed by America. (America's cultural "adolescence" is thereby compensated for!) America must assume the role of responsible spokesman and protector of European culture, the culture out of which it has itself developed. To do this, America must un-isolate itself first; must understand how Europeans think; must be ready to sacrifice immediate domestic necessities for more comprehensive and urgent international ones.

To begin, let me say that the distinctions you have been making about Europe and America do not exist, have never in fact existed. It seems to me that what you mean, or should mean, to hypothesize is Europe and Europe-in-America. Americans who have been to Europe recently—especially that majority who were coerced into going—may recognize a third entity which you do not consider: America-in-Europe. Perhaps the truth is (apologizing to "truth" itself, which should never be provincial) that few of us who speak of "the international idea" dare to mean more than Europe-America. And occasionally, when we speak of "international understanding" in such terms, we speak ideally of one who first understands his own land from having lived in other countries and then having returned to his native country. And not everybody: not the indiscriminating civilian-soldier, vacationing schoolteacher, globetrotter, playboy, international divorcee, or the foreign representative or business agent who sees only his narrow national interests abroad. We really speak of a handful of reflective men of sensibility who come or are driven to America and are in a position to partici-
pate disinterestedly on different levels of society. For a Frenchman or Spaniard or Englishman to understand America, he must first understand his own nation, and then the European conglomerate of which his nation is part; then he must live long enough in America in order not to be deceived by his own preconceptions about this country or by the superficial differences he notices in a week, a month, a year; then he must return to re-estimate his own country and the European conglomerate. Of course, all the way there is the temptation of curious audiences, demanding that their own illusions be preserved, who instigate premature statements from foreign visitors. And so the men of letters reply solemnly or breezily, or in both ways, to the old unanswerable questions, with which replies one is often forced to sympathize and disagree simultaneously.

The serious and uncommercialized writers in America (hiding behind their various professional aliases) are usually bookish people, rather sentimentally enamored of European things—what makes Eliot and James, and all of us so "typically" American! But you hit them in a weak spot when you tell American writers that they are "self-conscious" or "specialized" or "isolated" and when you call them "amateurs." Because it is the same cry they have been contending with here, the philistine cry, for a century, and because they, and you too, share the fabulous heart's desire that it is different in Europe. Most of them are not men and women of independent means, nor are they willing to commercialize their talents to meet the economic criterion for the successful writer. (Indeed, most of them, if they did try, would find themselves unable.) Nor are they usually subsidized long enough to forget the need of finding some economic prop by which to continue writing. If they make a niche in the community or if they succumb to drink or live on their friends, they are quite aware of their "unprofessional" status as writers, or of their dependence on other means than their writing for survival. But the best American, like the best Euro-
pean, writers have spent a considerable part of their lives as economic time-servers—the "amateurs" whom you disparage. (And the "amateur" condition, of course, determines, and is determined by, the "self-consciousness" and "isolation" of their production, quite often to the degree of neglect which their role of "unprofessional writers," "writers in disguise," elicits from the community.) Their being amateur is no measure of their responsibility as writers, which I rather think you question by insisting on that curious term so prominent in American sports talk.

For the life of me, I can't understand the old-bones-and-vineyard philosophy as anything more than a romantic yarn. One knows that with the wine of southern France and northern Italy came the sweetness of Provençal song, and out of the millennial rocks of Wessex, the acrid tragedies of Hardy. One also knows that the open roads leading out of New Orleans, Brooklyn, and Washington gave Whitman his vision of America. But it is not love of place, of section, or of country which you stress; it is a mentalized receptivity in the average reader, an interhuman understanding. In southern France one is reminded of the grape country around the Mohawk Valley; in the Black Forest of Germany one thinks of innumerable north American woods; over the Alps one thinks of the Sierra Nevada. The bones underlying the earth in all these places are as numerous and as indistinguishable culturally as the topography of such places. The interhuman understanding is found there, under the earth, and those who observe its existence are poets like you, men who have always observed here and elsewhere. There cannot be many differences between Europe and Europe-in-America. Maybe if that were better understood, we could really get somewhere "internationally."

But of course, that is just the trouble. There really are differences—only the ones you point out are not those that really matter. There are the differences between each of us having a
brainpan in which to warm over an old prejudice; there are the differences between each of us having something to sell who wishes something unsalable in return; and there are all the other differences which the interpreters of the psychologists, the economists, and the statisticians, whose business it is to deal in differences, are everywhere caging and refrigerating for our better misunderstanding of each other. There are all those differences—real and imagined. But we are getting tired of being waylaid and misinformed about them. So that when we hear a poet, a man of letters, a distinguished European writer, who comes here to embroider on those differences, we suddenly realize that such a man has stepped out of role, is not speaking to us as a poet, but as the shadow of stooped statisticians.

We would like poets to come here and stand up and be poets undisguised, poets who don't fear the wink or the snicker. To be a poet is to sing and heal the lacerations of spirit in men who believe only in the differences; to be a poet is to live on the differences in order to reconcile them. We are willing to be called amateurs, poets mumbling to ourselves, because there are enough of us, part-time and full-time, who still believe in the validity of the poet's role, who struggle to sing as Whitman and Homer sang, about the grass-blades and spears which we turn into separately and in our togetherness, in our typical strength and aimlessness. Instead of making fetishes of the differences between our bones, our deserts and our vineyards, let us learn to celebrate what the statisticians have never envisioned: the variety of elbow room inside and out of every person, place and thing throwing its shade on earth, and through such variety, the samenesses in all of us which show through and eventually overcome the ticklish differences.

This is what I would have said to you had there been time between the lectures and the parties and the time for driving to the airport to catch the next plane to arrive on time in the next city for the lectures, the parties, etc.