

## Chapter Thirteen

# Obiter dicta

*With what conviction the young man spoke  
When he thought his nonsense rather a joke;  
Now, when he doesn't doubt any more,  
No one believes the booming old bore.<sup>1</sup>*

I LOVE ITALIAN, it's the most beautiful language to write in, but terribly hard for writers because you can't tell when you've written nonsense. In English you know right away.

Novels, even good ones, can be read simply to pass the time; music, even the greatest, can be used as background noise; but nobody has yet learned to consume a poem: either one cannot read it at all, or one must listen to it as its author intended it to be listened to.

There could be no opera if we did not, in addition to simply having emotions, insist upon having them at whatever inconvenience to ourselves and others.

Writers are usually in the unfortunate predicament of having to speak the truth without having the authority to speak it.

When I hear, as I heard the other day, a college girl ask for a bestseller because she said she wanted to be able to talk about it, I feel a sympathy with the fascist slogan *Kinder, Kuche, Kirche*. When I discover the literary taste of some great textual scholars, I also wonder.

The greatest educational problem of today is how to teach people to ignore the irrelevant, how to refuse to know things, before they are suffocated. For too many facts are as bad as none at all.

I always have two things in my head – I always have a theme and the form. The form looks for the theme, the theme looks for the form, and when they come together you're able to write.

The Germans tend to regard one of their classic authors as Jesus Kleist.

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<sup>1</sup> From 'Shorts'.

I think we should do very well without politicians. Our leaders should be elected by lot. The people could vote their conscience, and the computers could take care of the rest.

Writers seldom make good leaders. They're self-employed, for one thing, and they have very little contact with their customers. It's very easy for a writer to be unrealistic.

I can't understand – strictly from a hedonistic point of view – how one can enjoy writing with no form at all. If one plays a game, one needs rules, otherwise there is no fun.

As great a poet as Dante might have been, I wouldn't have had the slightest wish to have known him personally. He was a terrible prima donna.

I live by my watch. I wouldn't know to be hungry if I didn't have my watch on!

Sorry, my dear, one mustn't be bohemian.

The problem with the behaviouralists is that they always manage to exclude themselves from their theories. If all our acts are conditioned behaviour, surely our theories are, too.

Sincerity always hits me something like sleep. I mean, if you try to get it too hard, you won't.

Italian and English are the language of Heaven, 'Frog' the language of Hell.

Jews are more complex than Gentiles.

No character in Dostoevsky would have made an amusing dinner companion, I think, whereas most of Dickens's characters, including many who were evil, would have been fascinating company at table.

Narcissus was a hydrocephalic idiot who thought 'On me it looks good'.

People who attend chamber music concerts are like Englishmen who go to church when abroad.

The older one gets, the more one values the age of friendship, as if it were a vintage.

When my time is up I'll want Siegfried's Funeral Music and not a dry eye in the house.

Ideally one should die upstairs, like Falstaff, while a party is in full swing below, and people are saying things like 'Now why doesn't the old boy get on with it?'

In spite of all that *einsam* rubbish, poets are no lonelier than anyone else. Poetry itself is lonely, of course, in the sense that few people read it.

Every time we make a nuclear bomb we are corrupting the morals of a host of innocent neutrons below the age of consent.

The trouble with dreams, of course, is that other people's are so boring.

I'm no advocate of the purely Uranian society myself. I mean, *I* certainly don't want to live *only* with queers.

The public thinks it can be unfaithful to a writer, but is shocked if the writer is unfaithful to it.

My face looks like a wedding-cake left out in the rain.

It's as if one said, 'It will rain tomorrow.' Perhaps, as it happens, it does, but one only said it because it rhymed with sorrow.

All this fuss over world government. It seems so simple to me. You just have to throw all passports in the sea, and tax incomes at the source.

If I had children, I would want them to be either physicians or ballet dancers. Then they'd always have a job.

I often spend time reading detective stories when I ought to be answering letters, but, if all detective stories were suppressed, I see no reason to believe that I should not find some other device for evading my duty.

The annual tonnage of publications is terrifying if I think about it, but I don't have to think about it. That is one of the wonderful things about the written word: it cannot speak until it is spoken to.

Thank God for books as an alternative to conversation.

If I lived under a dictatorship, I'd write children's stories. I'm sure one would get a lot in.

Poets are very vain, and wish they were the only one of them alive – and many persuade themselves they are.

I think a truly honest person would never wear a hat. Except in arctic weather a hat serves no purpose. The mitre, the Easter bonnet, the helmet, they function as insignia of power.

I have always found it remarkable that in poetry and romantic literature there is so much about sex and very little about food which is just as pleasurable and never lets you down.

To become preoccupied with beauty means a neurosis. There are people who stay always twenty inside. You look at them and think: 'My dear, if for one moment you'd allow your face to agree with your age!'

I don't go along with all this talk of a generation gap. We're all contemporaries, anyone walking this earth at this moment. There's a certain difference in memories, that's all.

My poetry doesn't change from place to place, it changes with the years. It's very important to be one's age. You get ideas you have to turn down – 'I'm sorry, no longer'; 'I'm sorry, not yet.'

I've noticed there are two classes of people who are very bad at reading poetry: those who are too shy like Marianne Moore, and those who are too conceited, like Robert Graves. I hope I'm neither.

It's very difficult for a woman poet to be sufficiently detached, whereas a man tends to become an aesthete, to become too detached, to say things not because he believes them but because they sound effective.

Both in conversation and in books people today are only too ready to take their clothes off in front of total strangers.

If the father is a novelist, the relationship is bound to be embarrassing, because he cannot help seeing the son as a character out of his novels.

The camera always lies. It just ain't art.

I love subways. I love being underground. Don't know what a psychiatrist would make of that.

What no critic seems to see in my work are its comic undertones. Only through comedy can one be serious.

In the end, art is small beer. The really serious things in life are earning one's living so as not to be a parasite, and loving one's neighbour.

Oxford was a place for England's elite. Which was all right. People can't be equal, it's absurd.

I admire the young when they're anti-money, but what they mustn't do is take money from papa and then criticize his way of life.

I didn't really learn to work until I got to the States. One of the besetting vices in all classes in England is idleness. I wonder why? Perhaps they worked too hard in the nineteenth century and got basically tired.

The duties of a writer as a writer and a citizen are not the same. The only duty a writer has as a citizen is to defend language. And this is a *political* duty. Because, if language is corrupted, thought is corrupted.

I think that at least one requirement for a lecturer is that he should have something to say.

*Kiss Me, Kate* is more fun than *The Taming of the Shrew*.

I'm against this idea in a culture that everybody has to have this kind of experience of 'falling in love'. It can be very bad when people imagine they've had it and it's something else.

Brecht was an admirable man, in the sense that one surely must admire someone who lived in a Communist country, but took out Austrian citizenship, kept his money in a Swiss bank, and hedged his bets when he was dying by sending for the priest, just in case.

A professor is one who talks in someone else's sleep.