

*Straight Ahead,
Bearing Very Slightly to the Right*

Within my first months at Harvard, I started writing for the *New Yorker*, inspired by my meeting William Shawn, its editor-in-chief. He dedicated his whole life to editing and perfecting the work of writers. He seemed to be above such worldly concerns as social status, brilliant talk, and money, epitomized in my mind in different ways by both Oxford and Harvard. Through working with him, I was coming under his influence, and he was bringing about a sea change in my whole way of thinking and living. After he started editing my writing, I couldn't bear the thought of not working with him, indeed, couldn't imagine my world without him—or, by extension, without the *New Yorker*. Still, my primary commitment remained to scholarship. I thought that I would publish scholarly books, which would allow me to earn my keep and to make my home in a college or a university, and write for Mr. Shawn on the side.

For some time now, I had had in the back of my mind a scholarly book, which would combine my interest in history with literature, and which would be on the Indian influence on England in the Victorian period. Feeling that a lot of work had been done on the English influence on India but not much the other way around, I thought I could do something new by studying the Indian characters and caricatures in English novels along with the strains of Indian mysticism, Indian philosophy, and Vedantic thought found in the English journals of the period. Given my Indian background and English education, and my passion for both history and literature, I felt that I was particularly well equipped to undertake such a scholarly study. In fact, at Harvard, when I was not working on history, I

was reading for this historical-*cum*-literary study and taking notes on Thackeray's "Vanity Fair," Wilkie Collins's "The Moonstone," Dickens's "The Mystery of Edwin Drood," and many lesser-known works with Indian characters that Edmund Wilson, who happened to be a visiting professor at Harvard that year, was sending my way. I conveniently forgot a sentence in the letter from Harvard, which I had received back in Oxford, informing me of my acceptance and award: "It is understood that this scholarship is to enable you to devote yourself full-time to the study of History." (The sentence was to haunt me for years after I had been to Harvard and left it.) To forge ahead with the study, though, I would have to forgo the vapid 301 reading courses and the pretense of preparing for the orals—indeed, to circumvent what I took to be the mechanical requirements for a Harvard Ph.D. in history. The only way I could do that was by trying for the Society of Fellows again and by enlisting Brinton's help. But he had been distinctly cooler to me at Harvard than he had been when we were corresponding—in all the time I had been there, we never so much as had a drink or a coffee.

I kept wondering why that was. He is a senior professor of a big university with many demands on his time and energies, I thought. Perhaps he finds it easier to put things on paper than to deal with a person one-on-one. He is given to sweeping generalizations, while I am interested only in concrete, factual stuff. We clearly have very different casts of mind. Perhaps, therefore, he's put off by me. He is childless. Perhaps he is aloof with everyone. But I have no choice but to sound him out.

As I was leaving one of my 301 sessions with him in November and, actually, was almost out the door and waving goodbye to Miss Hoxie, who never let up on her typing, I said, gingerly, "I wonder if you remember our correspondence about the Society of Fellows. You advised me to wait a year and I know I have only been here two or three months but. . ." He did not react, did not even catch his breath as I had imagined he would. "I don't mind the grind of memorizing facts," I said, and was almost about to blurt out my frustration with the 301 reading courses, which seemed to have no factual

content at all; instead, I went on, “But I am impatient to get on with my Indian-influence-on-England book.” I hastily and incoherently described the book I had in mind.

“I see your point—I’ll go along with it,” he said, urbane as always. “But I have those two colleagues who might not go along because of your blindness.”

“I’ll take my chances,” I said. “That’ll be the same whether I am a candidate this year or the next.”

“No individual can apply for a Junior Fellowship himself, but I will contact our friends at Pomona College and they can nominate you formally. It would look good to have the weight of a distinguished institution behind your candidacy.”

“Could Balliol nominate me?” I asked. “My tutors there I know would support me strongly.”

“I think it should be an American institution,” he said, without explaining why that was, and we left it at that.

In December, Brinton, in his capacity as chairman of the Society, sent me a letter that read, in part:

Dear Sir:

You have been recommended as a possible candidate for a Junior Fellowship in the Society of Fellows. . . . Please send me. . . a sample of work you have already done, either published or unpublished. It is more desirable to have a small selection of what you consider your best work than a large mass of material.

I put together a collection of my writings of various kinds, among them a paper entitled “Henry Ireton, Political Philosopher of the Puritan Revolution” and my first lengthy *New Yorker* story, entitled “Indian Summer,” and sent it along with the required statement of purpose—which was to write my scholarly study.