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## Wild Life, Wild Mind

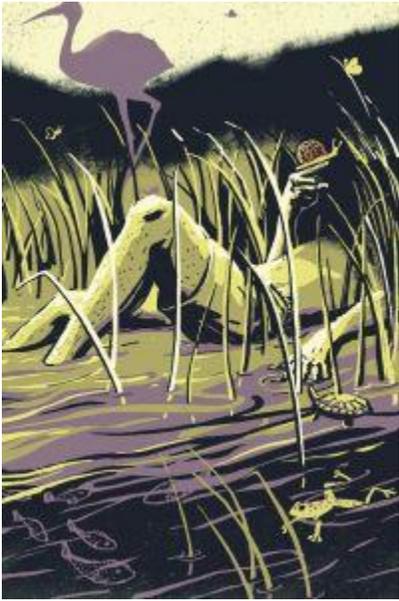


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### Essay by William Eaton

*None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory.*

— Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”

**T**here is that moment, which usually seems quite unremarkable, when we realize that we are having fun or that we are deeply engaged in some activity—dancing, talking with a friend, clipping toenails, what have you. What is not only interesting about the moment, but also sad, is that it usually marks the end of that particular pleasure. We may continue to dance, converse, or preen, but it will now be a more complex experience, in

which the fun is mixed with something else—the consciousness of having fun, or of being engaged.

*A personal example, a break from abstraction.* One gentle summer day, my son, one of his cousins, and I rented kayaks and headed out on a mountain lake in Vermont. No one else was in sight, and we were neither under a flight path nor within earshot of a highway. We pulled up in a cove, and Jonah, my son, got us happily engaged slinging handfuls of clayey mud and clumps of water grass at one another.

After a while, I left the boys to continue the laughing battle on their own, and I lay down in the reeds across the way, surrounded by little snails and insects of various sizes, a few of whom, both snails and insects, found their ways onto my arms and legs and began hunting for food. The pleasure of this, for me, may have had something to do with my not being a scientist, that is, not feeling the need to observe these creatures closely. I was glad to share with them a bit of myself and the afternoon.

It was around one o'clock, more than six hours of daylight remaining. The thought came to me that this was turning out to be one of the most wonderful days of my life. I remembered, too, how I used to walk among the wildflowers or lie down on my back in the hillside cemetery in Woodstock, N.Y. I thought that after lunch, the boys and I might move on to another part of the lake, and I might lounge among a different grouping of plants and animals. But by recognizing my feeling of well-being, I put an end to it.

It so happened that later that day I was reading a chapter about Susan Sontag in Daniel Horowitz's *Consuming Pleasures*, which contained these lines from her essay "Against Interpretation":

In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.

Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of "meanings."

While noting that Sontag was, as I am, an inveterate assigner of meanings (that is, interpretations), I might propose that interpretation, essay writing included, is also the revenge of the intellect upon experience. That doesn't seem quite right though. For one, interpreting, theorizing, ruminating, wishing, regretting, getting revenge, writing, reading, quoting: All this, too, is experience, being part of the world and absorbed in it.

I wonder also about the "revenge" in Sontag's assertion. It implies a conflict, which certainly there is between mediated and unmediated experience. But it also raises this question: What would experience (or art) do to the intellect that would make it want to fight back? Sontag writes that "real art"—and real nature and real experience, I would add—"has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and

then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable.”

And so we might imagine that lurking in the reeds beside me was the possibility of reconnection to my animal nature, to my carnality, and to a world not unlike the world of business in which there is nothing remarkable about being simultaneously predator and prey. (Or would the nervousness come from lying in warm water—reminders of my very first months in my mother's womb?)

Sontag singled out Kafka and Beckett as two artists whose work had been besieged by interpretations. We might say then that “real art” makes us nervous because of how it bypasses thought processes and categories, finding a home in our unconscious, in the wilderness of our minds.

Heading in the other direction, in *La pensée sauvage*, Lévi-Strauss proposes that we have been driven to develop conscious processes and classification systems, and to science, by the chaos of our sensations and the world outside of science. Sontag urges us to “recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.” But Lévi-Strauss seems to be saying that life—and, I will now add, art that moves us—routinely gives us more than we can handle without intellectual defenses.

After Jonah, Karim, and I left the lake and drove back to our B&B, they returned to their fantasy novels and electronic games. All I had left were memories and thoughts, and my capacity to hold on to them with prose. The idea came to me that our interpretations are like hawsers, allowing us to drift away from our sensations—from what we experience, and all the feelings that provokes—while also keeping us connected. And inversely: We would so like to merge with others and with nature, just to be part of the chemistry; but with weapons like interpretation, we do battle with our erotic urges, fighting to preserve our autonomy.

We ignore how thinking—about feelings, bodily functions, friends, politics, what's on the television—can be a comedown. I am not talking about abstractions or the possibility that someone else—Sontag, say—might be smarter than I am or have more-incisive insights than I do. I am talking about thinking on a much more basic level: that a particular peach tastes particularly good, or wondering in the middle of kissing if it is going to lead to sex, or what's for dinner.

All our lives include moments when we are nowhere—not coming or going; not judging or interpreting; sensing but not perceiving. At such moments we may be, Buddhist-style, absorbed in a Oneness of the universe, but we may also be in touch with the multiplicities of the moment—with snails, insects, and shouting boys. In my life, such a moment occurred one summer day in Vermont, lying in the reeds.

*William Eaton is the editor of Zeteo: The Journal of Interdisciplinary Writing.*