

THIS IS NOT RETRO CHIC!

Historians and archeologists always get it wrong. Every year brings discoveries demonstrating that human evolution goes back much farther than we thought, that the ancient civilizations are much older and more sophisticated than we thought. The recent discovery in Ethiopia of a *homo habilis* jaw that dates to 2.8 million years ago puts the earliest humans back a half a million years earlier than previously thought. A couple of months later a group of archeologists took a wrong turn in Kenya and discovered the oldest stone tool ever found: a napped cutter that is 3.3 million years old, showing significant sophistication, even though it predates our species. Whether it is Central American or Egyptian or Indic cultures, and many others as well, all new discoveries keep turning the clock back, never forward, on dating their advanced achievements. This is true even of the early 20th century.

Why should we think scholars who study the 20th century are any more accurate than the archeologists? Do we know about all the brilliant writers, artists, and composers of that period? Canons are made by people I don't trust. The great makers in all the arts lift the world up so their audiences can see it more fully. Academics nail down the work of those makers, so they can stake a claim, own it, and parcel it out at a profit. I spent 40 years in academia, as a student and professor. I saw work praised that



was utterly mediocre and more daring work dismissed as crazy or silly. Why do we think the anthology makers and art critics got it right? I've seen imaginative students (some were legitimate prodigies) enter MFA programs in art and creative writing and leave with a degree, but with no trace of what made them good in the first place. It's as if they had lined up for pre-frontal lobotomies. And who says teaching in MFA programs is the perfect haven for writers? I can't think of a single teacher in those programs who became a better writer by being there. One writer who taught creative writing seminars, one I admire greatly, said she could only write during summer breaks and sabbaticals, because teaching workshops left her unable to hear her own voice.

So much is lost. The New Critics, who were my generation's teachers, said "The cream always rises to the top. We know who the important writers were." Some of the cream rises to the top, but not all of it. There are great artists and writers whose ghosts

are waiting in lonely apartments and the ruins of studios all over the world.

There is an apartment on the Rue Jacob, deuxième étage, that has not opened its door since April 22, 1931. You have found the key to this apartment and a set of instructions. The person who lived here was the greatest poet of that era. He or she wasn't from Paris, or even greater France, but came to this gathering place from far away, somewhere to the east, or maybe to the west. His or her work received some attention for a time, but slipped long ago into the darkness of collective amnesia. You unlock the door and step inside.

A letter sits on the dusty writing desk beneath the cobwebbed drapes. (Do you remember snail mail?) The envelope is addressed to you. It's impossible to make out whether the stamp is French, Italian, or Spanish. Could it be an American stamp with a New York City postmark? After you get past the chills that have run up your spine, you pick up the envelope and use a letter opener to break the seal. The message is not short. The two handwritten pages give detailed instructions on how to break through your blocks, both the ones you know about and the ones you are completely unaware of: the spiritual and psychic weights that keep you earthbound. That letter tells you how to access a world that will blow open your imagination and enable you to write things no one has ever seen or dreamed of before.

It is midnight in Paris and the Golden Age of the avant-garde is always now. If you don't see spectacularly inventive work all around you, never assume that it's not being made. And never assume that we can succeed, individually or collectively, without knowing our ancestors.

