

MacDowell Colony
Peterborough, N.H. 03455
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Dearest Alger and Isabel,

I've got to bypass all preambles here to tell you that among my fellow MacDowell Colonists is Richard Owen. From start to middle -- it isn't over yet -- this encounter has been among the great weirdities of my life.

He composes operas, as you may know; his other profession interested me to begin with only insofar as I marked him down as one of Them, and found it rather odd since most people here earn their livings teaching. The composers all torture us by playing us hours of their ghastly stonalties which we politely endure, and in such a spirit I sat down to listen to a short opera of Owen's. He handed me a copy of the score; it said the librettist was Michael Straight. "Oh I know Michael Straight," I said (exaggerating; I only had a couple of conversations with the blighter on the Vineyard). Whereupon Owen said that he himself hardly knew him: they'd each been commissioned to do their bit and it was only afterwards he'd learned that Straight was a "closet commie -- and it could have ruined me if it had come out: me, Alger Biss's judge." My heart tripped. I said that unlike Michael Straight, whom in fact I'd only met, Alger is my friend.

The shock to him seemed even greater than it had been to me. I cannot convey to you how strange he has been about it. Anyway at that point he played his opera and I pretended to listen and he pretended to be playing it and listening too but his agitation was extreme; later someone in a neighboring studio said he had gone on pounding his piano with something like violence until nearly midnight. It was at midnight, back at the main lodge, that I encountered him again: he said how sorry he was. What are you sorry for? I asked, and he mumbled something about wishing he'd never brought it up, sorry to cause unpleasantness etc. All kinds of stuff tripped out, how he knew what efforts Victor had made to avoid having him as judge, how he'd spent inordinate effort and a month of his life on writing the opinion because he was aware of its historic importance and how it would be read by many outside the law (I said I'd seen it), how he'd seen the film last year and thought it "fair", how he'd heard about the humble employment you'd been forced to resort to; and justifications about **A**fter all, he'd only been asked to pronounce on the fairness of the original trials and he thought they were and so it was. But the tone of this was all so odd, apologetic to the point of presenting himself for flagellation, and lots more "sorries".

Well if that's what he wants, I thought to myself next day, I'll oblige. After work back at the lodge there he was, dying to give me a martini and talk

about it some more. I figured a possible approach would be not to close him off or provoke hostility by making it personal, but through the system. What a pity that we don't employ the Napoleonic Code, was the line, and try the whole man; for if only he had been made aware of the whole Alger he would have seen there is no one alive of greater probity, integrity and intelligence, and that to my mind the country should be honoring him for being a Great American. (I hate the whole idea of Great As but was trying my hand at Owen's language.)

Well what do you know but he accepted everything I said (the speech went on even longer and more fulsomely but I won't embarrass you with all of it). He seemed quite unbothered with the problem of assimilating any contradiction -- but ~~seems to~~ ^{was obviously} suffer from two severe visual deficiencies: split sight (one vision out of each eye?) plus a bad set of the blinders. Thus he said that someone (a Polish-sounding name starting with W from Boston, quite old and in the law) had not long ago explained to him that in the 50s the most concerned and honest people had joined the left. He pronounced this as though it were a historic revelation; it had helped him, he said, to understand how a man like Alger might have "gone wrong". Of course if he couldn't believe you had "gone wrong" it might call his own life in question, and he's not ready ^{for} or capable of that. If he were only capable, ready or not I'd pursue it because far from avoiding the matter he continues to make these grovelling apologies. Strikes me as sick. Reminds me, in fact, of nothing so much as my encounters with various informers like Budd Schulberg. (BS, upon meeting me, very drunk: "I want you to know I never gave your father's name." SE: "Whose fathers' names did you give?")

Owen is leaving here next week, otherwise I'd ask you if there were anything you'd like me to take up with him. Not that there's much point now, but -- well, cerie, isn't it.

Lots of love,

Jalley
(BELFRAGE)

I'll be passing through NY on the way home on Aug 29. Don't expect you'll be there but will ring both numbers.

Please share this with Victor if you'd like; can't write it twice. And give him my love.

→ As a matter of fact I haven't got your new address (only phone #) so will send this to V to pass on.