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The background of the top half of the page features a series of silhouettes of business professionals in various office activities. On the left, a person stands holding a document. In the center, two people are seated at a table, one writing. To the right, a person stands talking on a mobile phone, another sits at a desk with a computer, and a group of three people are engaged in conversation. On the far right, a person is pushing a cart. The floor is depicted with a grid pattern, and the overall scene is set against a light, hazy background.

1

UNIT

The Merely Very Good

Jeremy Bernstein

- 1 Early in 1981 I received an invitation to give a lecture at a writers' conference that was being held someplace on the Delaware River in Pennsylvania, just across from New Jersey. I don't remember the exact location, but a study of the map convinces me that it was probably New Hope. My first inclination was to say no. There were several reasons. I was living in New York City and teaching full time. My weekends were precious and the idea of getting up before dawn on a Saturday, renting a car, and driving across the entire state of New Jersey to deliver a lecture was repellent. As I recall, the honorarium offered would have barely covered the expense. Furthermore, a subject had been suggested for my lecture that, in truth, no longer interested me. Since I both wrote and did physics, I had often been asked to discuss the connection, if any, between these two activities. When this first came up, I felt obligated

to say something, but after twenty years, about the only thing that I felt like saying was that both physics and writing, especially if one wanted to do them well, were extremely difficult.

- 2 The conference seemed to be centered on poetry, and one of the things that came to mind was an anecdote that Robert Oppenheimer used to tell about himself. Since Oppenheimer will play a significant role in what follows, I will elaborate. After Oppenheimer graduated from Harvard in 1925, he was awarded a fellowship to study in Europe. Following a very unhappy time in England, where he seems to have had a sort of nervous breakdown, he went to Germany to get his Ph.D. He studied with the distinguished German theoretical physicist Max Born in Gottingen and took his degree there in 1927 at the age of twenty-three. Born's recollections of Oppenheimer, which were published posthumously in 1975, were not sympathetic. Oppenheimer, he wrote, "was a man of great talent and I was conscious of his superiority in a way which was embarrassing and led to trouble. In my ordinary seminar on quantum mechanics, he used to interrupt the speaker, whoever it was, not excluding myself, and to step to the blackboard, taking the chalk and declaring: "This can be done much better in the following manner.'" In fact, it got so bad that Oppenheimer's fellow students in the seminar petitioned Born to put a stop to it.
- 3 Quantum mechanics had been invented the year before by Erwin Schrodinger, Werner Heisenberg and Paul A. M. Dirac. The next year, Dirac came as a visitor to Gottingen and, as it happened, roomed in the large house of a physician named Cario where Oppenheimer also had a room. Dirac was twenty-five. The two young men became friends—insofar as one could have a friendship with Dirac. As young as he was, Dirac was already a great physicist, and I am sure he knew it. He probably just took it for granted. However, he was, and remained, an enigma. He rarely spoke, but when he did, it was always with extraordinary precision and often with devastating effect. This must have had a profound effect on Oppenheimer. While Oppenheimer was interrupting Born's seminars, announcing that he could do calculations better in the quantum theory, Dirac, only two years older, had invented the subject. In any case, in the course of things the two of them often went for walks. In the version of the story that I heard Oppenheimer tell, they were walking

one evening on the walls that surrounded Gottingen and got to discussing Oppenheimer's poetry. I would imagine that the "discussion" was more like an Oppenheimer monologue, which was abruptly interrupted by Dirac, who asked, "How can you do both poetry and physics? In physics we try to give people an understanding of something that nobody knew before, whereas in poetry..." Oppenheimer allowed one to fill in the rest of the sentence. As interesting as it might have been to hear the responses, this did not seem to be the sort of anecdote that would go over especially well at a conference devoted to poetry.

- 4 Pitted against these excellent reasons for my not going to the conference were two others that finally carried the day. In the first place, I was in the beginning stages of a love affair with a young woman who wanted very much to write. She wanted to write so much that she had resigned a lucrative job with an advertising agency and was giving herself a year in which, living on her savings, she was going to do nothing but write. It was a gutsy thing to do, but like many people who try it, she was finding it pretty rough going. In fact, she was rather discouraged. So, to cheer her up, I suggested attending this conference, where she might have a chance to talk with other people who were in the same boat. This aside, I had read in the tentative program of the conference that one of the other tutors was to be Stephen Spender. This, for reasons I will now explain, was decisive. I should begin by saying right off that I am not a great admirer of Spender's poetry. He is, for me, one of those people whose writing about their writing is more interesting than their writing itself. But I had read with great interest Spender's autobiography—*World Within World*—especially for what it revealed about the poet who did mean the most to me—namely, W. H. Auden. Auden's Dirac-like lucidity, the sheer wonder of the language, and the sense of fun about serious things—"At least my modern pieces shall be cheery / Like English bishops on the Quantum Theory"—were to me irresistible. I became fascinated by Spender's obsession with Auden. Auden must have been to Spender what Dirac was for Oppenheimer, a constant reminder of the difference between being "great" and being "merely" very good. I was also struck by the fact that, like Oppenheimer, Spender seemed "unfocused." Partly Jewish, partly homosexual, partly a British establishment figure, one wondered when he

got time to write poetry. By being profoundly eccentric, both Auden and Dirac, probably not by accident, insulated themselves. They focused like laser beams. What I did not know in 1981—I learned it only after Spender’s journals were published in 1986—was that Spender had paid a brief visit to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in November of 1956, the year before I got there and two years before Dirac came on one of his perennial visits.

- 5 Spender’s journal entry on his visit is fascinating both for what it says and for what it does not say. He begins by noting that “Oppenheimer lives in a beautiful house, the interior of which is painted almost entirely white.” This was the director’s mansion. Spender did not notice that, because of Oppenheimer’s western connections, there was also the odd horse on the grounds. He continues: “He has beautiful paintings. As soon as we came in, he said: ‘Now is the time to look at the van Gogh.’ We went into his sitting room and saw a very fine van Gogh of a sun above a field almost entirely enclosed in shadows.” At the end of my first interview with Oppenheimer, immediately after I had driven cross-country from Los Alamos in a convertible with a large hole in the roof and had been summoned to the interview while still covered in grime, he said to me that he and his wife had some pictures I might like to look at sometime. I wondered what he was talking about. Some months later I was invited to a party at the Oppenheimers’ and realized that he was talking about a van Gogh. Some years later, I learned that this was part of a small collection he had inherited from his father to which he had never added.
- 6 In his journal entry, Spender describes Oppenheimer’s physical appearance: “Robert Oppenheimer is one of the most extraordinary-looking men I have ever seen. He has a head like that of a very small intelligent boy, with a long back to it, reminding one of those skulls which were specially elongated by the Egyptians. His skull gives an almost eggshell impression of fragility, and is supported by a very thin neck. His expression is radiant and at the same time ascetic.” Much of this description seems right to me except that it leaves out the fact that Oppenheimer did have the sunwrinkled look of someone who had spent a great deal of time outdoors, which he had. Spender also does not seem to have remarked on Oppenheimer’s eyes, which had a kind of wary

luminescence. Siamese cats make a similar impression. But more importantly, Oppenheimer appears in Spender's journal as a disembodied figure with no contextual relevance to Spender's own life.

- 7 There is no comment about the fact that, three years earlier, Oppenheimer had been "tried" for disloyalty to this country and that his clearance had been taken away. One of the charges brought against him was that his wife, Katherine Puening Oppenheimer, was the former wife of Joseph Dallet, who had been a member of the Communist Party and who had been killed in 1937 fighting for the Spanish Republican Army. In 1937, Spender was also a member of the Communist Party in Britain and had also spent time in Spain. Did Oppenheimer know this? He usually knew most things about the people who interested him. Did "Kitty" Oppenheimer know it? Did this have anything to do with the fact that, during Spender's visit, she was upstairs "ill"? Spender offers no comment. What was he thinking? There were so many things the two of them might have said to each other, but didn't. They talked about the invasion of the Suez Canal.
- 8 In the fall of my second year at the institute, Dirac came for a visit. We all knew that he was coming, but no one had actually encountered him, despite rumored sightings. By this time, Dirac, who was in his mid-fifties, had a somewhat curious role in physics. Unlike Einstein, he had kept up with many of the developments and indeed from time to time commented on them. But, like Einstein, he had no school or following and had produced very few students. He had essentially no collaborators. Once, when asked about this, he remarked that "the really good ideas in physics are had by only one person." That seems to apply to poetry as well. He taught his classes in the quantum theory at Cambridge University, where he held Newton's Lucasian chair, by, literally, reading in his precise, clipped way from his great text on the subject. When this was remarked on, he replied that he had given the subject a good deal of thought and that there was no better way to present it.
- 9 At the institute we had a weekly physics seminar over which Oppenheimer presided, often interrupting the speaker. Early in the fall we were in the midst of one of these—there were about forty people in attendance in a rather small room—when the door opened. In walked Dirac. I had never seen him before,

but I had often seen pictures of him. The real thing was much better. He wore much of a blue suit—trousers, shirt, tie, and, as I recall, a sweater—but what made an indelible impression were the thigh-length muddy rubber boots. It turned out that he was spending a good deal of time in the woods near the institute with an ax, chopping a path in the general direction of Trenton. Some years later, when I had begun writing for *The New Yorker* and attempted a profile of Dirac, he suggested that we might conduct some of the sessions while clearing this path. He was apparently still working on it.

- 10 Now it is some twenty-five years later. The sun has not yet come up, and I am driving across the state of New Jersey with my companion. We have left New York at about 5 a.m. so that I will arrive in time for a midmorning lecture. I have cobbled something together about physics and writing. Neither of us has had a proper breakfast. As we go through the Lincoln Tunnel I recall an anecdote my Nobelist colleague T. D. Lee once told me about Dirac. He was driving him from New York to Princeton through this same tunnel. Sometime after they had passed it, Dirac interrupted his silence to remark that, on the average, about as much money would be collected in tolls if they doubled the toll and had tollbooths only at one end. A few years later the Port Authority seems to have made the same analysis and halved the number of tollbooths. We pass the turnoff that would have taken us to Princeton. It is tempting to pay a visit. But Oppenheimer is by then dead and Dirac living in Florida with his wife, the sister of fellow physicist Eugene Wigner. Dirac used to introduce her to people as Wigner's sister, as in "I would like you to meet Wigner's sister." Dirac died in Florida in 1984.
- 11 We arrived at the conference center a few minutes before my lecture was scheduled to begin. There was no one, or almost no one, in the lecture room. However, in midroom, there was Spender. I recognized him at once from his pictures. Christopher Isherwood once described Spender's eyes as having the "violent color of blue-bells." Spender was wearing a dark blue suit and one of those striped British shirts—Turnbull and Asser?—the mere wearing of which makes one feel instantly better. He had on a club tie of some sort. He said nothing during my lecture and left as soon as it was over, along with the minuscule audience that I had traveled five hours by car to address. My companion and I then had a mediocre lunch in one of the local coffee shops.

There seemed to be no official lunch. I was now thoroughly out of sorts and was ready to return to New York, but she wanted very much to stay for at least part of Spender's poetry workshop, and so we did.

- 12 I had never been to a poetry workshop and couldn't imagine what one would consist of. I had been to plenty of physics workshops and knew only too well what *they* consisted of: six physicists in a room with a blackboard shouting at one another. The room where Spender was to conduct his workshop was full, containing perhaps thirty people. One probably should not read too much into appearances, but these people—mostly women—looked to me as if they were clinging to poetry as if it were some sort of life raft. If I had had access to Spender's journals (they came out a few years later), I would have realized that he was very used to all of this. In fact, he had been earning his living since his retirement from University College in London a decade earlier by doing lectures and classes for groups like this. I would also have realized that by 1981 he was pretty tired of it, and pretty tired of being an avatar for his now dead friends—Auden, C. Day Lewis, and the rest. He had outlived them all, but was still under their shadow, especially that of Auden, whom he had first met at Oxford at about the same age and same time that Oppenheimer had met Dirac.
- 13 Spender walked in with a stack of poems written by the workshop members. He gave no opening statement, but began reading student poems. I was surprised by how awful they were. Most seemed to be lists: "sky, sex, sea, earth, red, green, blue," and so forth. Spender gave no clue about what he thought of them. Every once in a while he would interrupt his reading and seek out the author and ask such a question as, "Why did you choose red there rather than green? What does red mean to you?" He seemed to be on autopilot.
- 14 It is a pity that there are no entries in Spender's journals for this precise period. But it is clear that he was leading a rich social life at the time: dinner with Jacqueline Onassis one day, the Rothschilds' at Mouton a week later—the works. My feeling was that whatever he was thinking of had little to do with this workshop. Somehow, I was getting increasingly annoyed. It was none of my business, I guess, but I had put in a long day, and I felt that Spender owed us more. I didn't know what—but more.

- 15 My companion must have sensed that I was about to do something because she began writing furiously in a large notebook that she had brought along. Finally, after one particularly egregious “list,” I raised my hand. Spender looked surprised, but he called on me. “Why was that a poem?” I asked. In reading his journals years later, I saw that this was a question that he had been asked by students several times and had never come up with an answer that really satisfied him. In 1935, Auden wrote an introduction for an anthology of poetry for schoolchildren in which he defined poetry as “memorable speech.” That sounds good until one asks, Memorable to whom? Doesn’t it matter? If not, why a workshop?
- 16 I can’t remember what Spender answered, but I then told him that, when I was a student, I had heard T. S. Eliot lecture. After the lecture one of the students in the audience asked Eliot what he thought the most beautiful line in the English language was—an insane question, really, like asking for the largest number. Much to my amazement Eliot answered without the slightest hesitation, “But look, the morn in russet mantle clad / Walks o’er the dew of yon high eastward hill.” I asked Spender what he thought the most beautiful line in the English language was. He got up from his chair and in a firm hand wrote a line of Auden’s on the blackboard. He looked at it with an expression that I have never forgotten—sadness, wonder, regret, perhaps envy. He recited it slowly and then sat back down. There was total silence in the room. I thanked him, and my companion and I left the class.
- 17 I had not thought of all of this for many years, but recently, for some reason, it all came back to me, nearly. I remembered everything except the line that Spender wrote on the blackboard. All that I could remember for certain was that it had to do with the moon—somehow the moon. My companion of fifteen years ago is my companion no longer, so I could not ask her. I am a compulsive collector of data from my past, mostly in the form of items that were once useful for tax preparation. Perhaps I had saved the program of the conference with the line written down on it. I looked in the envelopes for 1981 and could find no trace of this trip. Then I had an idea—lunatic, lunar, perhaps. I would look through Auden’s collected poems and seek out every line having to do with the moon, to see if it jogged my memory. One thing that struck me, once I started this task, was that there are surprisingly few

references to the moon in these poems. In a collection of eight hundred and ninety-seven pages, I doubt if there are twenty. From *Moon Landing*, there is “Unsmudged, thank God, my Moon still queens the Heavens as she ebbs and fulls...” or from *The Age of Anxiety*, “Mild, unmilitant, as the moon rose / And reeds rustled...” or from “Nocturne,” “Appearing unannounced, the moon / Avoids a mountain’s jagged prongs / And seeps into the open sky / Like one who knows where she belongs” —all wonderful lines, but not what I remembered. The closest was “White hangs the waning moon / A scruple in the sky...” also from *The Age of Anxiety*. This still didn’t seem right.

- 18 Then I got an idea. I would reread Spender’s journals to see if he mentions a line in Auden’s poetry that refers to the moon. In the entry for the sixth of February 1975, I found this: “It would not be very difficult to imitate the late Auden. [He had died in 1973.] For in his late poetry there is a rather crotchety persona into whose carpet slippers some ambitious young man with a technique as accomplished could slip. But it would be very difficult to imitate the early Auden. ‘this lunar beauty / has no history, / Is complete and early...’” This, I am sure of it now, is the line that Spender wrote on the blackboard that afternoon in 1981.
- 19 Poor Stephen Spender, poor Robert Oppenheimer, each limited, if not relegated, to the category of the merely very good, and each inevitably saddened by his knowledge of what was truly superior. “Being a minor poet is like being a minor royalty,” Spender wrote in his journals, “and no one, as a former lady-in-waiting to Princess Margaret once explained to me, is happy as that.” As for Oppenheimer, I recall Isidor Rabi once telling me that “I never ran into anyone who was brighter than he was. But to be more original and profound I think you have to be more focused.”
- 20 As Spender says, W. H. Auden’s poetry cannot be imitated, any more than Paul Dirac’s physics can be. That is what great poetry and great physics have in common: Both are swept along by the tide of unanticipated genius as it rushes past the merely very good.

Introduction

The author

Jeremy Bernstein, born on December 31, 1929 in Rochester, New York, is an American theoretical physicist and science essayist. His grandparents on his father's side were immigrants from Lithuania while his mother was of Russian-Jewish descent. The family moved from Rochester to New York during World War II when his father became head of all Jewish chaplains in the American armed forces.

Bernstein studied at Harvard University, where he received his bachelor's degree in 1951, master's degree in 1953, and Ph.D. in 1955. His thesis was concerned with the electromagnetic properties of deuterium and supervised by Julian Schwinger. As a theoretical physicist, he worked on elementary particle physics and cosmology. A summer he spent in Los Alamos led to a position at the Institute for Advanced Study. In 1962, he became a faculty member at New York University. Later in 1967, he became a professor of physics at Stevens Institute of Technology, a position that he continues to hold as professor emeritus.

Bernstein is best known for his popular science writing and profiles of scientists. He was a staff writer for *The New Yorker* from 1961 to 1995 and authored many dozens of articles. He has also written regularly for *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New York Review of Books* and *Scientific American*, among other publications.

Bernstein's biographical profiles of physicists, including Robert Oppenheimer, Hans Bethe, Albert Einstein and others, are able to draw on the experiences of personal acquaintance.

The text

Jeremy Bernstein begins the essay with an invitation he received in 1981 to lecture at a writers' conference on poetry—though his first inclination was to turn down the invitation. Such a beginning serves two purposes: The first is to add a personal touch to the subject;

the second is that the recounting of everyday thoughts makes it easier for readers to identify with him and to accept his analysis. The author then brings in Robert Oppenheimer and Paul A. M. Dirac, their meeting at Gottingen and their discussion of poetry. Bernstein decided to attend the conference because one of its tutors was Stephen Spender, whose obsession with Auden fascinated him. Here the author brings in another pair of people: Spender and Auden. According to the author, Oppenheimer and Spender belong to the merely very good category and Dirac and Auden to the truly superior category. To be more original and profound one has to be more focused. This is Bernstein's conclusion.

Readers first encountering the title "The Merely Very Good" will hardly expect Robert Oppenheimer, "father of the atomic bomb," or Stephen Spender, English poet and critic, to be relegated to this category. Is the author in a position to give such a verdict? Jeremy Bernstein has been a professor of physics and a writer. He also has had connections with Oppenheimer, Dirac, and Spender in one way or another. He is, therefore, in a position to come to such a conclusion, whether the reader agrees with him or not.

There are two statements in the article which are worthy of notice. One is that great poetry and physics cannot be imitated. As Dirac puts it, "the really good ideas in physics are had by only one person." The other is Isidor Rabi's comment on Oppenheimer: "I never ran into anyone who was brighter than he was. But to be more original and profound I think you have to be more focused." The author makes a similar comment on Dirac and Auden when he writes, "they focused like laser beams." Apart from these two points, there is one more thing we should pay attention to—that is the skill of the author in knitting seemingly scattered anecdotes about several different people into a coherent whole. The anecdotes took place in Gottingen, Princeton and other locations and the time span is over half a century, yet these anecdotes, carefully chosen and related, together illustrate the message the author wants to convey. Such skillful writing is truly admirable.

Notes

1. **J. Robert Oppenheimer** (Para. 2): Julius Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967) was an American theoretical physicist and professor of physics at the University of California, Berkeley. He is among the persons who are often called the “father of the atomic bomb” for their role in the Manhattan Project, the project that developed the first nuclear weapons during World War II.
2. **Max Born** (Para. 2): Max Born (1882-1970) was a German nuclear physicist, who published a paper in 1924 in which the term “Quantum Mechanics” was used for the first time. He was the winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1954.
3. **Gottingen** (Para. 2): Founded in the 1730s by King George II, who was also ruler of Hanover, Gottingen University has a history of over 280 years.
4. **quantum mechanics** (Para. 2): quantum theory, especially the quantum theory of the structure and behavior of atoms and molecules 量子力学
5. **Erwin Schrodinger** (Para. 3): Erwin Schrodinger (1887-1961) was an Austrian physicist.
6. **Werner Heisenberg** (Para. 3): Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) was a German theoretical and nuclear physicist.
7. **Paul A. M. Dirac** (Para. 3): Paul Adrien Maurice Dirac’s (1902-1984) pioneering work in the quantum mechanics of the atom won him the Nobel Prize in 1933 when he was 31. A giant in his field, Dirac continued to make major contributions in many areas of modern theoretical physics.
8. **Stephen Spender** (Para. 4): Stephen Spender (1909-1995) was an English poet and critic. His early poetry—like that of W. H. Auden and C. Day Lewis, with whom he became associated at Oxford—was inspired by social protest. His autobiography, *World Within World* (1951), is a recreation of much of the political and social atmosphere of the 1930s. His passionate and lyrical verse is filled with images of the modern industrial world yet intensely personal. Spender was knighted in 1983.

9. **W. H. Auden** (Para. 4): W. H. Auden (1907-1973) was an English poet. As a young man he was influenced by the poetry of Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost, William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and by Old English verse. At Oxford his precocity as a poet was immediately apparent, and he formed lifelong friendships with two fellow writers, Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood. His collection of *Poems*, published in 1930, established him as the leading voice of a new generation. Ever since, he has been admired for his unsurpassed technical virtuosity and an ability to write poems in nearly every imaginable verse form; for the incorporation in his work of popular culture, current events, and vernacular speech; and also for the vast range of his intellect, which drew easily from an extraordinary variety of literature, art forms, social and political theories, and scientific and technical information. He had a remarkable wit, and often mimicked the writing styles of other poets. Auden is generally considered the greatest English poet of the 20th century.
10. **Los Alamos** (Para. 5): town in the state of New Mexico, the location of the famous American nuclear laboratory
11. **Spanish Republican Army** (Para. 7): the army of the Spanish Republic in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). During the war, the rebels under Franco, supported by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, defeated the Republican Army. Revolutionaries all over the world organized the International Brigade and fought on the side of the Republican Army.
12. **the invasion of the Suez Canal** (Para. 7): In 1956, after Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal, Britain, France and Israel attacked Egypt and started the second Middle East War, which is also called “the Invasion of the Suez Canal.”
13. **The New Yorker** (Para. 9): an American weekly magazine dedicated to ideas, embodying good writing and a point of view, and facilitating a deeper understanding of the world
14. **T. D. Lee** (Para. 10): Lee Tsung Dao (1926-) is an Chinese-American physicist

who won the 1957 Nobel Prize together with Frank Yang (杨振宁) for their work on the violation of parity law in weak interaction. 李政道

15. **Eugene Wigner** (Para. 10): Eugene Wigner (1902-1995) was a Hungarian-American professor of physics and winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1963.
16. **Christopher Isherwood** (Para. 11): Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) was an Anglo-American novelist and playwright, best known for his stories about Berlin in the early 1930s. *Goodbye to Berlin* is considered to be among the most significant political novels of the 20th century. In 1975, Isherwood won the Brandeis Medal for fiction.
17. **Turnbull and Asser** (Para. 11): British shirtmaker and clothier established in 1885
18. **C. Day Lewis** (Para. 12): Cecil Day Lewis (1904-1972) was an Anglo-Irish poet, critic, and educator, appointed Poet Laureate in 1968. He also gained fame as a detective story writer, producing 20 crime novels under the name Nicholas Blake.
19. **Jacqueline Onassis** (Para. 14): Jacqueline Bouvier Onassis (1929-1994) was born in Southampton, New York, of a socially prominent family and worked as a journalist and photographer before marrying John F. Kennedy (1953). As first lady (1961-1963), Jacqueline Kennedy planned and oversaw the restoration of the White House and had Congress declare it a national museum. After the assassination of President Kennedy, she returned to private life and later married the Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis (1968), who died in 1975. From 1978 until her death she was an editor at *Doubleday*.
20. **Rothschild** (Para. 14): It refers to the famous Rothschild family, who had an estate at Pauillac, France known as “Chateau Mouton Rothschild,” a very famous vineyard to the present day.
21. **T. S. Eliot** (Para. 16): T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) was an English poet, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948 “for his outstanding, pioneer contribution to present day poetry.” His representative work is *The Waste Land* (1922).

22. **Princess Margaret** (Para. 19): Princess Margaret (1930-2002) was the Countess of Snowdon, sister to the Queen of England, UK.
23. **Isidor Rabi** (Para. 19): Isidor Issac Rabi (1898-1988) was a professor of physics and Nobel Prize winner in Physics in 1944.

Vocabulary

inclination (Para. 1)	more or less vague mental disposition toward some action, practice or thing 意向
repellent (Para. 1)	causing distaste, dislike or aversion; repulsive 令人讨厌的, 令人反感的
honorarium (Para. 1)	a sum of money offered to a professional for a piece of advice, a speech, etc. (专业服务) 酬金
feel obligated to (Para. 1)	to feel it is your duty or morally right to do something 感到有责任
come to mind (Para. 2)	to think of or remember 想起
anecdote (Para. 2)	a short story based on your personal experience 轶事
elaborate (Para. 2)	to give more details or information about something 详尽阐述
fellowship (Para. 2)	a sum of money paid by an institution or an endowment for the support of a graduate student, scholar, etc. doing advanced study in some field 奖学金
nervous breakdown (Para. 2)	a mental condition in which you are so upset or unhappy that you cannot carry on with ordinary life 精神崩溃
recollection (Para. 2)	a memory of something 回忆
posthumously (Para. 2)	used to say that a work is published after the author's death 死后出版地
enigma (Para. 3)	someone or something that is mysterious and difficult to understand 神秘的人 (或事物)
in the course of things (Para. 3)	while things are happening or continuing 在……期间
go over well (Para. 3)	to be well received 留下好印象
pit against (Para. 4)	to set in competition (against) 使与……抗衡

lucrative (Para. 4)	profitable; producing wealth or profit 赚钱的
gutsy (Para. 4)	(<i>slang</i>) courageous; daring 大胆的
in the same boat (Para. 4)	in the same difficult or unpleasant situation 处境相同
lucidity (Para. 4)	clarity; the quality of being easily understood 清晰, 透明
obsession (Para. 4)	preoccupation; an extreme unhealthy interest in something or worry about something, which stops you from thinking about anything else 困扰; 迷恋, 痴迷
eccentric (Para. 4)	odd, unconventional 古怪的
insulate (Para. 4)	to detach from the rest; to isolate 与……隔绝
perennial (Para. 4)	constantly recurring 经常出现的
journal entry (Para. 5)	a written record of your experience in which you write about what happens every day 日志记载
convertible (Para. 5)	a car with a roof that can be folded back or removed completely 有活动折蓬的汽车
grime (Para. 5)	dirt, especially sooty dirt, rubbed into or covering a surface, as of the skin 尘垢
elongate (Para. 6)	to make or become longer; to stretch 拉长
eggshell (Para. 6)	the hard outside layer of an egg; the fragile nature of something 蛋壳; 薄而易碎的东西
fragility (Para. 6)	the state of being easy to break or damage 脆弱
radiant (Para. 6)	showing pleasure, love, well-being, vitality, etc.; beaming 容光焕发的
ascetic (Para. 6)	self-denying; austere 禁欲的; 苦行的
sunwrinkled (Para. 6)	with small lines or folds caused by long exposure to the sun 由于太阳长时间照射而起皱纹的
wary (Para. 6)	feeling or showing caution; on one's guard 谨慎的; 有戒心的
luminescence (Para. 6)	a soft shining light 柔和的光

Siamese cat (Para. 6)	a breed of short-haired cat characterized by slanting, blue eyes and a fawn-colored coat shading to a darker color at the face, ears, paws, and tail 暹罗猫
disembodied (Para. 6)	(soul or spirit) separated from the body 形神分离的
contextual relevance (Para. 6)	the whole situation, background, or environment relevant to a particular event, personality, creation, etc. 上下文联系
clearance (Para. 7)	official, especially governmental authorization allowing a person to examine classified documents, participate in confidential projects, etc. 接触机密的官方许可
collaborator (Para. 8)	someone you work with in some scientific or other undertaking 合作者
chair (Para. 8)	an important or official position, as a professorship; when a chair has a name (modifier) before it, such as Lucasian chair, it means the position is associated with an endowment from a person or an institution, implying higher pay and prestige 讲座教授
clipped (Para. 8)	short, trimmed; quick 简略的; 快速的
indelible (Para. 9)	making a mark that is impossible to remove; permanent 无法磨灭的
thigh-length (Para. 9)	up to the top part of one's leg 长及大腿的
cobble (Para. 10)	to put together clumsily or crudely 拼凑
turnoff (Para. 10)	a road that leads off a main road or motorway 岔道
blue-bells (Para. 11)	any of various plants with blue, bell-shaped flowers 风信子等开蓝色铃状花的植物
minuscule (Para. 11)	very small; tiny 细小的; 微不足道的
mediocre (Para. 11)	average or below average in quality 非常普通的; 中等的
avatar (Para. 12)	any incarnation or embodiment, as of a quality or concept in a person 化身
outlive (Para. 12)	to live longer than someone else 比……长命

be under sb.'s shadow (Para. 12)	to feel or seem unsuccessful in comparison to someone who is very successful (生活在) 某人的阴影中
the works (Para. 14)	(<i>informal</i>) everything 所有的事情
egregious (Para. 15)	especially noticeable 异乎寻常的
russet (Para. 16)	reddish brown 赤褐色的
mantle (Para. 16)	a loose, sleeveless cloak or cape (sometimes used figuratively, alluding to royal robes of state) 披风, 斗篷
clad (Para. 16)	wearing a particular type of clothing 穿着
yon (Para. 16)	over there (在) 那边
compulsive (Para. 17)	impossible to control 难以抑制的
jog sb.'s memory (Para. 17)	to make someone remember something 唤起某人的记忆
unsmudged (Para. 17)	unsoiled, not having become dirty 未被污染的, 未被弄脏的
jagged (Para. 17)	having a rough or pointed edge or surface 凹凸不平的
prong (Para. 17)	a long, sharp point 尖齿; 尖头
seep (Para. 17)	to flow into or out of something through small holes 渗出
crotchety persona (Para. 18)	the eccentric personality presented to others by an individual 古怪的人物形象
relegate (Para. 19)	to consign to an inferior position 降级归类为
lady-in-waiting (Para. 19)	a woman attending or waiting upon a queen or princess 宫女, 侍女

Exercises

I Look up the following words and phrases and select the meaning that suits the context.

1. to carry the day (Para. 4)
2. rough going (Para. 4)
3. establishment (Para. 4)
4. rumored sightings (Para. 8)
5. school (Para. 8)
6. following (Para. 8)
7. out of sorts (Para. 11)
8. to read into (Para. 12)

II Consider the following questions when doing initial pre-class preparation.

1. How does the author begin the article? Why does he begin the article in this way?
2. What made him finally accept the invitation?
3. What was he asked to lecture on? Why?
4. How were the author, Oppenheimer, Dirac, Spender and Auden related to each other?
5. According to the author, what was the characteristic that Oppenheimer and Spender shared which made them “the merely very good”? Was the author correct in considering them “the merely very good”? Why or why not?

III Respond to the following questions after a close reading of the text.

On content

1. How did the author get to the conference? How long did it take him? Was there a large audience?
2. How did Spender conduct the workshop? What does this show?
3. What annoyed the author at Spender’s workshop? What did he do?
4. What do you know about Oppenheimer from this article?
5. What was Prof. Born’s view of Oppenheimer?
6. Were Oppenheimer and Dirac good friends? In what ways were they similar and different?
7. When Oppenheimer “discussed” poetry with Dirac, what was the latter’s remark? Did Dirac think one could do both physics and poetry? Why or why not?
8. Why had Oppenheimer been “tried” for disloyalty to the United States? Try to find out more about the case.
9. Why did Oppenheimer want to show people the painting of van Gogh? Where did his small collection come from? Did the collection expand? Why or why not?
10. Who was Dirac? Why didn’t Dirac have any school or following? How did

he teach? Why?

11. Describe the scene of the author's meeting with Dirac at Princeton. What is implied in the description?
12. What did the anecdote about the toll and toll booths show about Dirac?
13. What sort of person was Stephen Spender?
14. When the author asked Spender what he thought was the most beautiful line in the English language, what was Spender's response? Why was there total silence in the room after Spender gave his answer?
15. What makes the author think Oppenheimer and Spender are "the merely very good"?

On structure and style

1. How is Oppenheimer first mentioned in the article?
2. How is Dirac first introduced?
3. How is Auden first introduced?
4. How does the author manage to bring the different anecdotes and personal relationships together? What method does he use to achieve the coherence of the piece?
5. What is the contrast implied in the following statements? Comment also on the tone:
 - While Oppenheimer was interrupting Born's seminars, announcing that he could do calculations better in the quantum theory, Dirac, only two years older, had invented the subject. (Para. 3)
 - Some years later, I learned that this was part of a small collection he had inherited from his father to which he had never added. (Para. 5)
 - (He) ... left as soon as it was over, along with the minuscule audience that I had traveled five hours by car to address. (Para. 11)
6. What does the author mean when he writes "Spender was wearing a dark blue suit and one of those striped British shirts—Turnbull and Asser?—the mere wearing of which makes one feel instantly better."? (Para. 11)

IV Discuss the following or any other related questions you would like to propose.

1. The author's view appears to be that the contribution of individuals who are "merely very good" is not significant as compared with that of the very few who are outstandingly, undeniably intellectually "superior." Do you agree with this view? Why or why not?
2. Do you think there can be such a person as a "Renaissance Man"? If so, would it be a good thing to be one?
3. Do you agree that focus is a key element in making an individual intellectually superior to others? Do you agree that people sometimes have a tendency not to see the crucial importance of focus in their intellectual and other pursuits?
4. Do you think Dirac is correct in saying that a truly creative idea can only

be conceived by one individual?

5. “A nation will prosper only when its young people thrive.” Has this essay given you food for thought? What do you think young people should do to improve themselves and thrive?

V Explain the following in your own words, bringing out any implied meanings.

1. ... I was conscious of his superiority in a way which was embarrassing and led to trouble. (Para. 2)
2. ... this did not seem to be the sort of anecdote that would go over especially well at a conference devoted to poetry. (Para. 3)
3. Pitted against these excellent reasons for my not going to the conference were two others that finally carried the day. (Para. 4)
4. He is, for me, one of those people whose writing about their writing is more interesting than their writing itself. (Para. 4)
5. Auden’s Dirac-like lucidity, the sheer wonder of the language, and the sense of fun about serious things... were to me irresistible. (Para. 4)
6. Spender’s journal entry on his visit is fascinating both for what it says and for what it does not say. (Para. 5)
7. ... Oppenheimer appears in Spender’s journal as a disembodied figure with no contextual relevance to Spender’s own life. (Para. 6)
8. The real thing was much better. (Para. 9)
9. One probably should not read too much into appearances... (Para. 12)
10. He had outlived them all, but was still under their shadow, especially that of Auden... (Para. 12)

VI Translate the following into Chinese.

1. He rarely spoke, but when he did, it was always with extraordinary precision and often with devastating effect. (Para. 3)
2. At least my modern pieces shall be cheery / Like English bishops on the Quantum Theory. (Para. 4)
3. Spender also does not seem to have remarked on Oppenheimer’s eyes, which had a kind of wary luminescence. Siamese cats make a similar impression. (Para. 6)
4. ... Oppenheimer had been “tried” for disloyalty to this country and that his clearance had been taken away. (Para. 7)
5. But, like Einstein, he had no school or following and had produced very few students. (Para. 8)
6. ... he remarked that “the really good ideas in physics are had by only one person.” (Para. 8)
7. But look, the morn in russet mantle clad / Walks o’er the dew of yon high eastward hill. (Para. 16)
8. Poor Stephen Spender, poor Robert Oppenheimer, each limited, if not relegated, to the category of the merely very good, and each inevitably saddened by his knowledge of what was truly superior. (Para. 19)