

ABOUT LAST NIGHT

TERRY TEACHOUT on the arts in New York City
(with OUR GIRL IN CHICAGO and CARRIE FRYE)

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TI: Time off (and on)

I didn't take any time off this summer, so last week I compensated myself for my excessive industry by spending three nights with Mrs. T at Ecce Bed and Breakfast, the peaceful retreat in the southern Catskills where we spent part of our honeymoon four years ago and about which I've written more than once in this space. Since the point of taking time off is to do nothing, I don't have any leisurely activities to describe. We slept late, we took a long afternoon drive and looked at the autumn foliage, we sat on the terrace and looked at the Upper Delaware River, we ate a very nice dinner in the quaint little town of Narrowsburg, and we watched a couple of movies.

Oh, yes—I wrote the first draft of a new play. From scratch.

Temporary inactivity, even for so short a span of time, usually recharges my creative batteries, but I wasn't counting on quite so spectacular a demonstration of its rejuvenating effects. I suppose it would have been better, all things being equal, if I hadn't written a word at Ecce, but once the coin dropped, I figured I'd better follow it wherever it rolled, and when it kept on rolling, I kept on following. "I guess it's good that we didn't have a whole week off," Mrs. T said with amusement when I announced that the play was finished.

Not really. The truth is that I only managed to skim the cream off the top of my weariness last week. I really do need a week or two off, and I won't be getting it until January, when we'll be heading south to Florida for a sun-and-theater "holiday" that will include an uninterrupted span of theoretical inactivity on Sanibel Island, where I wrote three chapters of my Duke Ellington biography this past January.

No doubt I'll get yet another chunk of writing done in Florida. Writing, after all, is what I do, not merely for a living but also for the sheer love of putting words together. I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't write. H.L. Mencken, the subject of my first biography, learned the answer to that question when he suffered a stroke in 1948 that deprived him for the last eight years of his life of the power to read and write. It was a hideously ironic fate for a man who had spent the greater part of his waking life pecking away happily at his typewriter, and it chilled me to write about it in *The Skeptic*.



Yet even Mencken finally managed to come to terms with his fate, as a friend of his later recalled:

What remained to him of his old joys was music; many mornings he told me how he had listened for a couple of hours the night before and how superb it had been. Yet in truth he had left to him something the average man never acquires—the capacity to enjoy the commonplace activities of life. Though these, of course, could not make up for his inability to work, they helped. One lovely autumn morning, with the sky clear, the breeze cool, and the sun warm, Mr. Mencken sat over in the sun so that it fell on his back. "Well, this is very nice. This is fine. This ought to make us feel good...You know, I always enjoyed life in all its forms. I've always taken a great pleasure in getting up in the morning, having breakfast, and settling down to work. I had a good time while it lasted."

I mean to have an equally good time while it lasts, but should the time ever run out, I hope I can enjoy sitting in the sun as much as Mencken did. That said, I also hope that I never have to relinquish the miraculous, inexplicable joy of settling down to work each day—or the more explicable but no less miraculous joy of taking an occasional day off, a pleasure whose savor is heightened by the preceding day's work as the flavor of food is heightened by a judicious pinch of salt.

I suppose I'm a workaholic, but it reassures me to know that I can take it or leave it alone. Yesterday I woke up at eight-thirty, looked at the clock, gave brief thought to writing a piece for *The Wall Street Journal*, then said to myself, The hell with it. Instead I spent the whole day in bed reading Ian Ker's new biography of G.K. Chesterton, then arose in the evening and went downtown to have dinner with friends and hear Pat Metheny and Larry Grenadier at the Blue Note.

Today belongs to the *Journal*, but Sunday belonged to me. I had a good time while it lasted, and it lasted all day long.

