

Konnarock, Virginia
June 20, 1949

Dear Margaret,

Just outside the window in front of which I am sitting a young robin is restlessly flying from tree to tree and from branch to branch, apparently not quite sure where he belongs or where he wants to go, where he came from or what he wants to be when he grows up. A romantic poet would use him for the subject of a lyric poem, a philosopher would see in him a symbol of the purposeless activity of the universe, and a naturalist would deny the philosophical and poetical implications of my robins' frenzied flight with scorn and say that the poor bird is probably hungry and wants to eat, or thirsty and wants to drink, or lonely and looking for his parents' nest.

However that may be, he proved an allusive introduction for my letter. I just finished writing a thank you note to Enge which was not easy to write. I could hardly quote Rilke about loneliness nor Dante about the day that was departing, although I almost did. In the end my letter exhibited all the faults common to my ways of thinking, an assumed naivité on the one hand, and the inevitable affectation of thought and language that accompanies it on the other. I think that every time we attempt to be something which we are not or should not be, our personality loses its equilibrium. Our soul, instead of remaining where it belongs, at the focus and center of physical and mental activity, moves outside of ourselves, into the gesture of a hand, into a nod of the head, or a pose of the body which is foreign to us. Or our words become the words of actors, phrases hollow as decayed trees, - we say things in order to hear ourselves speak, sentences constructed for their effect and not their meaning. Affectation, I think, is ugly and hateful, and comical at the same time, like the English instructor who didn't like subjunctives. It is like a disease, insidious in its own way, for once having caught it, one cannot rid himself of it, and thinking on it only aggravates a bad thing and makes it worse.

I wanted to ask you to be patient with me for whatever affectation finds its way into my letters. Sometimes I think that all aspiration after beauty or truth must become affectation, when there is not the ability or the energy to realize it. No phrase would need to be affected if we had the power to fulfill its meaning. I, for myself at least, feel pitifully inadequate in the face of the demands which every inanimate object, not to speak of animals or even human beings, makes upon both intellect and emotion. I can neither understand a thing and its meaning nor surround it with all of the love and care it needs. In the end it withers like a flower that lacks water, and becomes common and cheap.

Mais revenons a nous moutons.. (You like French idioms, don't you ? This one is from a mediaeval comedy, and I have probably misspelled it, because I don't intend to look it up. It means to get back to the ~~subjec~~ subject.) Revenons a nous moutons. About the way I am writing this letter is what I want to tell you, because it would be sad if you were to misunderstand me and think that I was making a great and perhaps a bit too showy intellectual or literary effort. You see, my writing is shod with self-consciousness like a horse with horseshoes, and at every step they clatter and sound, and in every paragraph I say hardly knowing it, "Excuse me."

I first started thinking about this letter just before Alec and I came to Hartsville on our way home, and periodically since then I have come to think of it again, and written a little bit of it in my mind, more for the pleasure itself of writing than in the hope that I might remember to put down all the things of which I have thought. At that rate, I should be sending you a short story or a novel rather than a mere letter which is already beginning to outgrow its modest intentions. I thought of writing you when I was sitting in church last night. The topic of the sermon was the Word of God, it was a bad sermon, I suspect, because I didn't listen, but it was a good time to think because unlike in meeting, one is not distracted by the silence.

If only I could remember what I was thinking about. But much escapes, and little remains in the mind, which in the end is as barren as a sieve. Many things about Great Barrington I have also already forgotten. Right now you are probably on your way to New York already, and the process of forgetting is just commencing. But something more important takes the place of what we forget, at least for me.. During the past few days, my thoughts have been spinning a curious veil of memory over our six days together at Great Barrington, and I think when it is finished it will be very beautiful. What we remember has actually so little to do with the event. All that which takes place, said Rilke, is so far in advance of our knowledge, that we never catch up with it and never know what it was really like. But memory can be a very beautiful and altogether a good thing.. It will eradicate the moonfaced musician and the modernistic English instructor on both of whom I am doubtlessly too harsh with my judgment.. To be remembered are the lake and the cool clearness of its water, the sound of the ripples against the dock, the reflection of the setting sun on the wavelets, and the day that was departing, "and the brown air taking the animals, that are on earth, from their toils;" that left us with nothing but our thoughts..

Some things one should not attempt to speak of, much less write about them. There is so much to be said, and so little means for saying it. It was very good of you to tell me as much about yourself as you did, and your "faith" - I use this for want of a better word - or confidence, was the first time ever that anyone (outside my immediate family) has given me the feeling that he needed me. For that feeling I know not how to thank you enough. Because it is precisely that, which I need in my loneliness, and it is the only means of friendship open to me with anyone. And so, you see, what you did for me on those few walks in Great Barrington was probably much more than I did for you, because ~~again~~ I had never forgotten until then that I was lonely..

I am myself frightened by these attempts to express myself. Plato wrote in one of his dialogues that the spoken word is nobler than the written word, and the thought is nobler than the spoken word. Hence it might be better to think or at least to say these things of which I have tried to write. Nor is it a lack of self-assurance that I do so, but rather from the hope that it might make you a bit less gloomy than you would otherwise be. Then the effort would be much more worthwhile than most of the things on which I spend my time.

Just now I read what I have written so far, and I find it neither too much nor too long, - you may disagree with me there, - but a good deal too clumsy. The last paragraph on page one is perhaps a bit too Rilkean and certainly beyond my intellectual means to express adequately. Take it for what it is: an attempt, and do not blame the ideas for being poorly said by me.

If it is true, as you told me, that for you not intellectual abstractions but their human source is of importance, then you will not misunderstand. I feel very strongly that our ideas are the most valuable phases of our lives, because only in them can we approach any kind of truth, and only as related to truth, only as we exist in truth, do we have value. Ideas should be like bridges, on which we walk to meet each other. And mine are fragmentary girders stretching out into the sky, waiting to be completed.

Alec may have told you that we decided not to bother with buying books in New York. I shall write him soon, perhaps tomorrow, and ask him to buy some sheet music for me when he gets the chance. If you have time, and only if you have time, I wish you would send me a copy of Kierkegaard's Either Or, James' Varieties of Rel. Exp., and about three or four books in French, inexpensive editions, and you ~~can~~ can use this list as a guide: Rousseau: Nouvelle Heloise, Confessions, or Reveries d'un Promeneur solitaire, or Lamennais, Paroles d'un Croyant, a novel by G. Sand, V. Hugo, or Stendhal, or Baudelaire's Fleurs du Mal, a volume of criticism by Taine or Saint Beuve, or poetry by Chernier, de Vigny, Lamartine, Hugo, de Musset, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Paul Claudel, or Maurice Maeterlinck, in all for not more than 10 or 15 dollars. But please don't go to any trouble, and don't worry about making choices the way I would.

If I don't have enough, I might write you again, but then, I might do that any way. Take it as a threat or as a promise.

Rousseau
Stendhal
Verlaine

La Chartreuse de Parme

Very sincerely,

John