

Konnarock, Virginia
June 30, 1949

Dear Margaret,

Thoughts are traveling through my mind as do clouds through the sky on a windy day, some ponderous and large, others slight and small, their origin unknown, their destination uncertain. Their passage is silent like that of wind through trees and behind them they leave only vague murmurs of memory. Uncounted words, all incorporeal answers to your letter, have vanished beyond the horizon of my mind. Even worthier than thoughts forgotten are those not even thought once, and those which I have forgotten would be far better than those I write now. But if you will disregard what I write, and read in my lines what I myself have forgotten, and think yourself of those things which are beyond me although I thirst for them, then I can write with satisfaction and pleasure, knowing what I say to be but a symbol for what I want to say, and confident that you will not misunderstand me.

Thank you for buying the books for me. I shall mail the check for them in my next letter; it would be inconvenient now and I know you will not mind. Of James' lectures I have read enough thoroughly to disagree. His interpretation of the religious experience seems to me rather inadequate. "To understand the causes of drunkenness is not to be drunk;" of the religions of Pascal, Spinoza, Rembrandt, Bach or Newman, James has no inkling, Dr. James, the sober psychologist. Nor does he understand the anti-religious tendency which characterizes the thought of people like Beethoven, Schopenhauer or Nietzsche. Indeed, the only thing James seems to be capable of is the analysis of certain phases of religious ecstasy. The genesis of his lectures was contemporary with the invention of assembly-line automobile manufacturing by Henry Ford, and the methods of the two men, their attitudes toward the human soul and the automobile engine, have many similarities. "Religion is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism" (p. 480). "The scientific God does a wholesale, not a retail business" (p. 484). "God is real since he produces real effects." (p. 506) The terminology is that of an automobile salesman. The basis of the religious experience can be separated from "over-beliefs" in this way and automobile chassis can be separated from the body. The proof of the pudding, says James, is in the eating. The vital question, does the car sell? In spite of his pragmatism, James seems to be aware of certain spiritual problems, but his advice is hopeless like the advice of a physician who is ill himself and aggravates the disease instead of curing it.

Thank you also for your letter which I have read repeatedly, and which I like more each time I read it for all it tells me of you. I liked your objections to my ideas and I have thought a good deal about them. I want to say more about them later. What you wrote was like a mirror of your thoughts, it was almost as good as a walk, and it helped me. My mind still dwells on the same circular problems, and however much I try to intellectualize them, they leave me little rest. My own letters

make me blush, and when I read them I stand before a mirror of myself and see the vanity of my words. The newly acquired ideas, what are they, if not rouge to hide my own paleness, and the meaningless phrases are like lipstick to conceal expressionless lips. However beneficial the light, the picture remains unchanged, and sometimes I grow very much afraid of myself.

If I thought you were at all interested I could discourse on my faults at great length, although I cannot condemn them with the rigorous severity with which you speak of your own. I accept them, perhaps far too readily, like a sore on my foot, and I am contented to limp through the streets in plain sight of all people. Concerning them, I can observe only one sin of commission, that is life itself, and one sin of omission, which is not to die, - if one looks at it that way. An unbalanced equation, this pessimism which father insists on calling nihilism. I ~~xxx~~ cannot escape the idea that every human action involves some quality of sin. But then, what is sin?

I cannot believe that sin is a divine institution, or that hell is a penal colony designated by heaven, or that the devil is God's executioner or agent provocateur. Are they not all human rather than divine inventions, the aggregate of our own fears and failings given a place in the metaphysical scheme? You fear condemnation ~~xx~~ for choices which you believe to be wrong. But is a right choice possible at all? I think of life itself as a second choice, and every action it encompasses must be a second best, a less worse, not a better alternative. Nor do I believe our choices to be as mechanical as positivistic historians would have us think. Whether the will is free and what control we have over it, I do not know. Nor can I tell whether choices are predetermined and inevitable or not, but surely they are not wholly arbitrary decisions of the visible world alone. Who knows how many hidden motives, unheard and undreamed of, there be in the process which imblithe ignorance we call causality.

Our relationship to God I believe transcends our conception of sin. For what is sin but a shadow cast by our specific limitations into the radiance of divine perfection. What reality has a shadow? Does it not disappear with the object in the path of the light? When ~~man~~ ^{man} ~~the last~~ dies, does not ~~the first~~ ^{the first} die also? Sin is a limitation of goodness as a shadow is a limitation of light. And life is intrinsically limitation, both qualitative and quantitative. What we call knowledge can only be a pale reflection of truth, and our virtues no more than distorted copies of goodness. In the face of our imperfections we want to be gods after our ideals of what gods should be like. The common end of our endeavors is to make our lives "Imitations of Christ." The ideals of morality are a god-like purity of heart; the ideals of science, a god-like knowledge of nature; the ideals of technology, a god-like control of natural phenomena; and particularly the ideals of art, a god-like power of creation. Everything we do, it seems to me, is an irrepressible expression of our desire to be like God.

12-5-30

That the soul cannot attain none of its aspirations because of its own limitation is a battle lost before it is begun and a metaphysical frustration. That the attempt itself is the origin and essence of our sins is tragedy. What was the original sin if not the first manifestation of the human thirst for knowledge and the divinely paced barriers upon the human mind. All philosophy is quest for forbidden fruit, and the punishment is always the same: expulsion from paradise and banishment from the sight of God. Jesus came not to save the righteous man, or the wise one, or him who was God-like, but him who was poor in spirit, ~~ignorant~~ ignorant, and corrupted. He came for the African native who needed him, rather than for us who have tried to free ourselves from dependence upon him. I think the African bushman must be closer to God than are we with all our philosophy and ethics.

as if Our cultural attainments cannot be good, because they cut us off from God, nor can they be evil, when they are the expression of our desire to be like him. Our lives are like cathedrals ~~xxx~~ built so high ~~as though they wanted~~ to touch heaven. From the outside they look magnificent, but their vaults are dark like caverns under the earth, and if one wants to see the clouds and the stars, it is better to go outside. Children and primitive men must be closer to God than are we. They do not build cathedrals and need not justify the attempt that was never made.

If life implies separation from God, and if separation from God is sin, then life is sin, and our love for God is a painful paradox. Every finger we raise for an oath, every fist we make in anger, every hand we fold in prayer and every arm we stretch out for aid casts its shadow in the light of divine perfection. The very processes of life be they spiritual or physical imply sin. (For example, the Darwinian struggle for survival, the purely intellectual assertion of an opinion; both imply injury if not injustice to another individual.) Do not the sins of others frame our virtues? Each time we rise, must not someone else fall? Each time we give, must not someone else receive? And when we rejoice must not someone else weep. When we eat, who starves for us? When we behold, who is blind in order that we might see. Who is deaf in order that we might hear? When I am well, must not my brother be ill, and while I live, must he not die?

"It is necessary that things should pass away into that from which they are born. For things must pay one another the penalty and compensation for their injustice according to the ordinance of time."
(Anaximander)

One speaks of "solutions" to these problems. One envisions goals of life, goals of all shapes, sizes, and prices, tailored to suit your needs, depending on your taste and with how much effort you want to purchase them. The common ideal of social and financial success costs very little; the ideals of asceticism and puritanism are dearer; and perhaps the Quaker goal of "inner peace" is dearest.

But it will be difficult to convince me that life leads to any kind of goal or to any manner of salvation. We live for nothing but death, and death itself and death alone is the justification for life, death as the biological and spiritual reduction of the chemical compounds and cultural complexes which life has accumulated. The common belief

concerning a goal in life must be an illusion from which men suffer, perhaps because the way back is so much quicker than the long torturous way out.

Life is only a long walk to the brink of a hill, - but we must return to our starting point. Death is a fast driver and many a bough over which we once stumbled will escape our gaze. A pail that has been filled drop by drop takes but a moment to pour out, and a cloth that took years to weave can be unravelled in a moment. You need not pity the Indonesian savage. He did not have to walk so far and will be sitting on the porch, rocking himself in the shade, when we arrive home. We will sit down beside him, more tired than he, and wait until it is time to go in for supper. He asks us what we have gained over him by our exertions: the gains are few and intangible. What we have seen he would not have enjoyed, a sunset, a mountain, or a tree. What we have heard would not have made him happy, neither the wind in the trees nor the music. But the sun set and all was dark; the wind ceased and all was silence. We had arrived at the brink of a hill, but the land was veiled in clouds and we could tell nothing of its geography. The mere consciousness that it was there inspired us.

I don't think that any of us will have to justify ourselves at supper. We shall all eat the same food without discrimination. Everyone has been away, and each on a different path of differing length in a different direction. And all are brought together by a common vehicle. Our choice of direction now is not a matter for which we will be justified or condemned. Whatever path we take, death will find us there. We will be close to our destination when we are lost, but when we think we see a goal we are farthest from home. To him who asks us where we are going we can truthfully answer with Novalis: "Immer nach Hause," and when we are asked concerning the length of the journey, Joyce answers for us, "The longest way around is the shortest way home." The farther we walk, the more beautiful is the scenery. For you see, we are just at the beginning and have a long way to go. Nor should we think too much of home, of the past, of whence we come, of what we have seen already, lest by stopping and looking back, we be turned into pillars of stone like the fugitives from Sodom and Gomorrah. To those who pass by and who are still to come we would stand fear-inspiring monuments, like Thomas Chatterton, or my friend Kleist or Rilke's friend Kalckreuth for whom he wrote the Requiem, or your friend from school.

The choices to be made now are not fatal but merely a matter of taste, - the kind of scenery we like, mountains or ocean, a matter of climate, and a matter of roads. There are smooth ones, hard-surfaced, smelling of tar, and crowded with Fourth of July vacationists, - or lonely dirt roads with many curves and switch-backs, and steep banks. They are dusty in summer and mired in winter-time, rutted so deeply that one must beware of getting stuck. I like them better.

I have told you a long story, which perhaps, you didn't want to hear and if you listened only half-heartedly and from politeness, I should not be offended. The nature of stories is that one tells them for their own sake, if necessary to oneself, - over and over again. It is twice as good to have a sympathetic listener, - but from my own experience I know that while to some stories one listens from politeness, some are too sad
and

too fearful to be listened to. When I was in kindergarten, and fairy tales were told which I thought were too sad, - because I thought that life was frightening enough, and one did not require invention to make it worse, - I habitually left the room with the curt explanation that I needed fresh air. - I would not blame you for doing the same. But if you stay to listen, that would make me very happy; and you know how much I like to tell you my stories and/to wait for your answer.
then

John.