

Konnarock, Virginia
July 20, 1949

Dear Margaret,

It is late now, and only a cup of tea is keeping me awake. Mosquitoes and gnats are making their crazy orbits around my lamp. Outside everything is dark. Everything is silent but for the wind caressing the trees. Some frogs are croaking in high-pitched monotone out in the meadows, and somewhere a lonely dog is howling his despair into the night. Periodically a bug attracted by the light will thump against the screens, and soon I shall hear father snoring. Then I will pour myself another cup of tea and know that another day has passed.

It is past midnight now, and I can feel the advent of the new day. It's coming is slow and painful, like the coming of spring, and the preparation is harder than we are wont to think. The coming is painful, but the passing away is light and painless. Days succeed each other more quickly than I can adjust myself to them, and I have time for only half of all the things I had hoped to do. Much of my time I spend helping father in the laboratory; in the kitchen dish-washing and setting the table takes enough of my time; what is left I spend reading Kierkegaard, Plato, Rousseau, and Buddha. Father thinks I read too much, but I, of course, disagree.

Your letters, those you write and those you do not write, and my letters, those I write and those I do not write, are ~~taking~~ occupying an ever-growing portion of my time. My thoughts have a marked tendency toward letter form, and I am constantly engaged in imaginary conversations on subjects which concern me most. Now and again I startle at the notion that perhaps no one except myself is at all interested in such things as concern me; my thoughts have carried me so far away from the usual routes of philosophical or religious discussion that conversations quickly turn into arguments. The arguments have an invariable ending, namely, the other person tells me my thoughts are impossibilities, and I have nothing to content myself with except the reiteration of my favorite defense, that I am misunderstood.

You will understand why I must thank you for answering my letter so minutely, I think that perhaps you take me too seriously, because at times your letter sounds almost like a defense against my speculation, particularly when you say that in spite of its logical consistency, you do not find it necessary to defer to my philosophy. But why should you? Will you believe me when I say that I ~~believe~~ think your ideas are much more ethical than mine, much healthier and much more conducive to life? When I write you of what I think, I do so not because I value my ideas or judge them good, but merely because I like to write you, and because I like to have you correct ~~them~~ ^{my ideas} as you see fit.

I am not writing well tonight, and shall not continue for long, no longer than it takes me to write what I have in mind now. First of all, a paradox: You who say that you are in such need of other people insist on the great differences that exist among us, while I, who pride myself on a certain self-sufficiency in that respect would tell you that those differences are but illusions. More particularly, I do not see where your philosophy is so different from mine as you would have it. All our cogitation, I believe, is the attempt to attain one common and unchanging truth, and this truth which is true for all men alike is really the strongest bond among us. The experiences of our daily life should be the piece-meal revelations of the truth we seek, but the truth itself we can never see. The more we experience, the more we should be able to understand, and what we understand is a reflection of our character and our experiences. Or, putting it more accurately: experience is the dull and blemished mirror which reflects the true lights. The nature of the mirror determines the pattern of the image. The more intimately we live our experiences, the truer are the insights. I believe I could explain how my ideas have been molded by my life, and ~~for~~ your philosophy likewise. What you say about sin and hell and humility which does not claim possession seems particularly valid to me, and as unique and as beautiful as the life which lies behind it. Except on a few points too unimportant for elaboration I assent to everything you say, and I believe no contradiction exists, either spiritual or logical, between what I meant in my letter and what I understand you to mean in yours.

It would be a dull task and an empty one if I tried to equate our standpoints one by one, and show that logically no difference exists. I should be writing a philosophical essay instead of a letter; I had determined to avoid philosophical rigor in the first place, because somehow I feel that you do not care for it. Besides, our ideas and everything valid or permanent in life are like a dream and it is useless to argue about them. What we must do is understand them.

Suppose you knocked and it were not opened unto you; suppose you sought and did not find; suppose you asked and it were not given unto you, what would you do? You would say that you had done the best you could, and would try to do better. But if you knocked until your hands were bleeding, or sought until you had lost your way, or asked until your voice was hoarse, and you died from the strain of knocking, of seeking and of asking. Suppose you watched someone else die from the strain and the burden, would you call God a liar and a deceiver, would you argue with Him as did Job? Would you accuse the world, God's world, of injustice, or would you accept ~~it~~ as an unfortunate accident, an occupational hazard of modern living, and try to forget that there was a God or that justice existed?

the failure

The modern sociologist believes that every man has a niche in life into which he fits, and the task of finding it is merely a matter of adjustment. Despair, according to him, is a matter of maladjustment and may be settled by the employment office, the marriage bureau, the family counseling service, or compulsory health insurance. The social scientist would take all responsibility from God's shoulders, but who besides Him can bear it. Who besides Him can account for the suffering and the anguish? Whom can we accuse but Him when we despair over the state of the world?

I know that it is said that malaria is caused by the anopheles mosquito and will be eradicated from the face of the earth in a few years. I know that within a hundred years there will be no more slums in America and the death rate will have been lowered appreciably. That fifty thousand people were sacrificed at Nagasaki and Hiroshima I have also heard: they gave their lives, it is said, that an even greater number of American and Japanese soldiers might live. The people who died in Coventry and London were the victims of a flaw in our social structure. I understand that none of these catastrophes must be allowed to happen again.

I ask: whose fault was it? You will tell me that in one case, the Japanese military lords were to blame, in another, the Russian Junkers, the German Nazis. The famine in India this year is the result of a lack or an excess of rain, and the periodic earthquakes in Japan are caused by a redistribution of pressure under the earth's crust. But where is God? If he is sleeping, it is high time some one woke him up. If he is paying no attention, it is high time some one reminded him of his business. If he simply does not care, some one should remind him of his responsibility. Or shall we relieve Him of his post, and consign his duties to the United Charities and the Council for Concerted Democratic Action? We might, keeping in mind various historic precedents, summon him to Jerusalem before an international tribunal and try him for gross negligence of duty. A U.N. committee could supervise the proceedings to make sure that no injustice was done to God.

Or could it be that God was right and that we were wrong. Can any other relationship exist between us and God, but that He should be in the right and we should be in the wrong. "The sparrow falls to the ground - in a way it is right before God. The lily fades - in a way it is right before God. Only man is in the wrong, for to Him alone is reserved that which to all other creatures is denied... to be in the wrong before God." I believe that when one has penetrated below the surface of events, one cannot conclude but that somewhere something is wrong. The positivist will say that God is wrong before man, and that man's destiny is to ~~not~~ make perfect what God has imperfectly begun. But I believe that I have but one choice, namely to say ~~that~~ with Kierkegaard, that before God man is always in the wrong, and when I translate that to apply to the individual, I cannot escape the conclusion that every human action involves some quality of sin. N'est ce pas?

Now I would like to tear up what I have written, ~~but~~ ~~we~~ because in the first place I did not want to impose my ideas on you quite so emphatically, and in the second, because when one speaks of things which are too great and too far outside of oneself, one becomes ridiculous. If we were talking I would laugh with you over the cosmic ~~paradox~~ ruts into which my letter has lapsed. I would like to tear up what I have written, but that would not unwrite it, would not eradicate it, would not make it undone. I wish there were a flame so hot that it could annihilate thoughts and make all imperfections perfect by destroying them; then I would write only worthwhile things. Short of that, I can send them to you... these thoughts which are so in the wrong before God, not because I would convince you of their rightness, but because their wrongness is too heavy for me.

My preface has taken me three pages. How long-winded I am! My letter will get to you sometime about your birthday, - I don't know when it is exactly, - but I want to add my congratulations and best wishes to the many others you will receive. - - - Now I sit here wondering just what those words mean, and if anything, how much. The time has been when I would not have congratulated anyone upon his birthday, and I wonder whether you actually want to be congratulated. "A quarter of a century old" you told me you would be, and you complained of having accomplished so little.

Sometimes I feel as though the length of time we lived coiled itself about our shoulders as a heavy burden, becoming progressively heavier, until one day we would not be able to bear up under it. If the years which you have lived, since you first became conscious of time's passage appear to you like a burden, who would I be to argue with you. Those heavy years I would not congratulate you upon. ~~XXX~~ I would limit myself to congratulating to those years which I think I see in you ~~now~~ now. Those days and weeks when you thought time was a curse rather than a blessing, they were the moments, I believe, when a new thread introduced itself into your life. Our past sufferings and our forgotten pleasures, but above all our sufferings, remain with us throughout life. They become part of us, and reappear to us in different guises. The significance of past happenings is not their momentary sadness. They become part of the warp and woof of our lives and for their faithfulness we must love them; they extend through our personalities like threads through cloth. They make the pattern and they give the strength. And if they were not so important a part of your life, I would not be able to write you like this at all. Most of those friends of yours who will congratulate you, ^{will} congratulate you ~~on~~ in spite of ~~them~~, but I want to congratulate you because of ~~their~~ ^{your} sadness. ~~in their sadness.~~

your life

My wishes for you are only one: that the darkness which may be around you in the months to come shall be like the darkness of early morning which precedes the dawn. Do not the birds sing in anticipation of the light? Does not the wind itself become calm in the solemnity of that hour? Nature takes infinite pains in its preparation for dawn, precisely because that which precedes heightens the beauty of that which follows. Is not the happiness of the dew on every blade of grass that it shall be ~~wiped~~ dried by the coming sun? The sun comes suddenly. The moment itself is short, but the waiting is infinitely beautiful.

Johann

P.S.. Mother invites you to come down together with Alec when he comes in August. I would like you to come, and I think you might enjoy the change. You must decide with Alec.

My sister is working in Chambersburg now. She did not intend to come home until the end of August; she fears boredom. But if you come with Alec, Margrit would come home too, and in that case it would be only logical for her to come with you.

What all this will do to Alex's plans I can well imagine, yet I know you can persuade him if you think it would be a good thing. I give you my sister's address, in order, that, if you decide to come, you can arrange with her ahead of time whether she will come to Philadelphia or whether you will pick her up in Chambersburg, depending upon the route Alec decides upon. It is necessary for you to write her only if you decide to come: Margrit Meyer

1244 Scotland Ave.
Chambersburg, Pa.

Phone: 126-R

Will you let me know your decision ?