

Philadelphia
August 25th, 1949

Dear John,

"e have been home for some hours. The poor sick cat, who has been languishing for almost a week, has been taken to the veterinarian; boxes stand about in the hall; we have sat and talked to Dr. Marsh and his wife who now live where Janet and I used to live. I have tried to arrange my possessions in this third floor room which is large and beautiful but a little too full of my archaeologist aunts possessions. Since I love her and they are nice things I am really quite happy simply to fit myself in. We will be here only a very short time. Mother will go to New York to see Janet, and Papa, Alex and I will go to New England to visit Aunt Priscilla, collect Peter from camp, and spend a couple of days with Enge. When can I begin to study? I shall simply continue to read what I like and try to become acquainted with the trees; Mother gave me a large book about them for my birthday. Alex sneers that I will know all about them and will forget to love them ("love" is not his word, but that is the drift). Someday he will know better; in fact, I think he does already. On the way back from New England, perhaps I shall stop in New York to see about the typing of my paper and to inquire about one of the courses which I must teach this year. By the way, the address of the Modern Language Association is 100 Washington Square.

My first reaction to your letter was one of annoyance and irritation. Now, do not leap to the conclusion that I misunderstood. In the first place, when I am away from you my feelings about you and my estimation of you are apt to be more critical than when I am with you. The pedagogical impulse (or whatever it is) swims up to the surface. At first, I could not analyse or localize the irritation. It seemed to be as much directed at myself and my previous letter as at anything. It still is, but only to a minor degree. The grass needed cutting before we went away again, so I went out and did such a furious, thorough job for an hour, that Alex finally

came out to stop me, fearing some reflection on his manhood.

The putting in order of my room, and a bath have also ordered my thoughts; I shall try to get some of them written so that I can go to sleep; tomorrow contains an ordeal by dentist.

The gist of my irritation seems to be that you make such difficulties over everything--what should be simple, as well as what is really very hard. There is much in life that is complex, difficult to understand or to do. But I think it is wrong to seek pain and suffering for its own sake and wrong to be continually anxious over details. Strength in happiness and strength in suffering ~~both~~ are two sides of the same thing. This is badly said; I can at least, be more exact if I speak concretely. Often you seem to argue for the sake of arguing, simply to contradict and to shove your opponent to the brink of some exasperated absurdity or overstatement. Your remarks on Frau Kaufmann's letters are a case in point (Forgive me, it is most ungracious of me to bring it up again when you have finally said what I felt at the time but could not say because I was too appalled to think) You knew that your mother was right in insisting on the necessity for expressing gratitude and yet you felt she did not grasp the difficulty of doing so without false overstatement and so you went to the other extreme, seeming almost to deny any validity to such expressions. Such arguments do not convince your ^{hearers} ~~listeners~~ of the difficulty or complexity of a particular problem. They only ~~disturb~~ create a false and stupid misunderstanding. Truth is not served; your opponent is only the more completely isolated.

I think your continued concern for the state of my feelings toward you is part of the same attitude. I am so much happier than I was at the beginning of June. You view this fact with alarm and assemble your hypotheses: 1) She is building castles in the air, expecting me to become something which I fear I can never be--and anyhow I don't want to be. 2) Let alone the future, she is overinterpreting the present: my words and gestures don't mean what she thinks they do. 3) Aside from my own role, she has no business being happy; life is too painful; she is either deluding herself (is blind to Truth) or insensitive. All right, I know this is a parody, but this is an echo of what I seem to hear. So you worry and feel it really isn't fair to have to bear a responsibility you didn't ask for. Very well, I will say it again: You are not responsible; you helped me in June to free myself from something which I had been trying to shake off for months. Since then your letters have goaded me into more thinking than I would have done alone--have filled the time with substance. And because you are struggling and striving for a treasure that cannot ~~be~~ be seen, ~~by~~ I feel more courageous in my own struggle, not because I think ~~we~~ that it is the same treasure. You are the only one of my friends for whom it is as serious as it is for me; and for you it is more serious, more painful. There is another aspect which I will not deny, but which I find very difficult to assess. It is easy for me to feel affection; it is natural for me to express it. You can find and invent objections to everything, but please don't start looking again. That kind of analysis is quite pointless. If you like, you can imagine ~~by~~ that I like you as I do a tree or a fine mountain. Reciprocity would have no meaning in such a relationship. I am aware that the mountain is covered with snow most of the year, and the fact that it may not be at any particular time does not ~~indeed~~ mean that the mountain is fond of me. I like the view; I will remember it always.

Now perhaps I can go to sleep and finish this tomorrow.

A night and a day have passed since I wrote the first part of this letter; it is too compressed and not smoothly expressed, but I think you will be able to understand. After I had turned out my light last night, I had another surge of irritation--that you should suppose that all of my happiness and peace depends on you; you were there at the beginning, but I am far from arguing from origins. If you should hurt me--it would hurt, but it would not be like the anguish of last winter which was self-poison because the source was in myself. This year my work will be completely of my own choosing--work that I can do well, which satisfies the devotion which I have to teaching. My sister is no longer a source of anxiety and desperation. And, though I have joined no church, I think I have begun the road. So for many reasons, both material and spiritual, the anxiety which has choked and blinded me is almost gone. I should not like to subject this peace of mind to a great test, but even if it were to fail in a particular instance, I think it would return. Now, that is enough, in fact, altogether too much an analysis of me. I will accept and consider any further rebukes which may burden you; there are many things which I know of myself, but which I can see more clearly when they are told me--or the rebuke stings me into action. I am not afraid of your honesty or bluntness, but do not argue simply for the sake of argument.

I think of many things which I would like to talk with you about. I am about two-thirds of the way through "The Magic Mountain." I do not understand it as an allegory, ~~though I see some of the things which~~ I am fascinated by the conversations, individual aphoristic sentences, description of moods and groups. Yet the separate characters are so flat and unreal that I can hardly believe the power of the book.

I came upon one or two arguments which echoed ^{discussions} ~~arguments~~ which you and I have had. The Jesuit presents his world in which good and evil, body and spirit are in continual conflict and comments on the Humanist's philosophy: "your monism is so tedious." I remember a discussion which we had in Gt. Barrington in which I protested that aesthetically, if for no other reason, I needed the Devil in my world.. My egoism has blotted out your answer; however, I don't think it was a very good answer; this letter of yours makes me suspect you of a more dualistic philosophy than you then admitted. "Impurity" is your Satan. You say that "every action has some duality of right and wrong". I cannot agree. The hesitating reasoning before action may contain many more choices than a simple either/or, but the action itself is one thing--unless the hesitating spirit arrests the hand in midair, or makes the voice tremble. Once the decision is made, and the action taken, it is useless to talk of the choices that might have been made; they are not expressed in the action. (I am aware that my argument lacks something, but there is a measure of truth) Reason may deny the action and resolve never to take such an action again, but the action is what it is, a terrible and naked simplicity which explanations and motives can veil but not conceal. The simplicity which is terrible is also very calm and beautiful if spirit and reason leave the hesitations and move forward with the action and rest in it. The impurity which should cause us suffering is not the imperfection of our knowledge; we are not God; We should rather suffer for the impurity of an evil choice or for the contradiction of the action which the spirit denies. If we suffer because of the imperfection of our knowledge, we suffer because we are not God and risk the most damning sin--pride.

There is also another and almost mystical effect of action; it often ~~anticipates~~ seeks the mood from which it should logically spring. Pa pa often quotes a sentence from a Christian Apologist: "Obedience is the opener of the eyes." Von Hugel says; "I kiss my child because I love him and I kiss my child in order that I may love him." I have talked to you before about this function of action. I know that it must not be taken too lightly; it must not be played with as one would a machine. One must investigate the credentials of those who recommend the action which is to be taken half-blind.

It is late, and I am very tired. Part of the morning was spent in shopping in Philadelphia. My first days at the Brearley ~~depend~~ depend very much on externals which you would dislike. Fortunately, I do not resent them, and I take a childish pleasure in my skill at finding the beautiful and simple in the confusion. In the afternoon, I went out to Bryn Mawr. The library doors were wide open; I met only one librarian who did not look up from the card catalogue. I wandered for a while in the stacks. Books and writing are a continuing mystery and delight to me. Finally I left with my own choice and went to see a college friend, her sister and the sister's babies. My friend and I took care of the little girls in our French camp. He is a very gentle and affectionate person. I am the more drawn to her because I knew her when she was terribly anxious and uncertain, when her anxiety crippled those around her. She presents me with a dilemma: if I had not known her before would I think her serenity invalid because I knew nothing of the struggle that preceded it? But I cannot think anymore; I am too tired.

Goodnight,

Margaret