

Konnarock, Virginia
August 30, 1949

Dear Margaret,

All day I have been trying to work, but in vain. What use? I can feel that the summer is past. The leaves have begun to turn yellow, not on all trees but on some. And those few that have lost their dark green hue tell of the future of them all. The wind has become colder and stronger. Two days ago the first storm of autumn tore the first leaves to the ground and into the mud puddles. They shall not have to wait long for company. The apples are ripe and rotting on the trees, because no one takes trouble to pick them. At night one hears them fall, dull, ominous thuds in the wet grass. The ripeness of all things demands winter, snow, and peace from the incessant activities of life. Only we, who have done no work, who have tried everything and accomplished nothing, we tend to regret the longer shadows and the colder winds. If we had achieved maturity, would we not also welcome peace?

For us there are no seasons, only the interminable present. We shed no coats as do snakes. In a sense we never escape the past because the capacity for experience is so limited, and what we knew not how to assimilate comes back in many different ways. If our assimilation is a process of synthesis, then even what we assimilate becomes a part of us, and never leaves us, and in time must grow very heavy.

"What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.
But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose leaves
I know not.
Other echoes
Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?" (T.S. Eliot)

We do wrong to distinguish what might have been from what was not. Nothing which was not could have been. Why do we deceive ourselves? Perhaps some fragment of not-being came very close to ourselves and yet passed by. In passing by it touched us, and took a few threads of our being into its unreal realm of not-being. In place of the thread, there is emptiness now; the threads are gone. We remember not their color, but only the pain we experienced when not-being came so close. What we mourn now as what might have been is but an emptiness, and we speak of it as of a sadness or of a loss.

Yet that which was, was sufficient unto itself, or seems so now. But at the moment we experienced it, it seemed inadequate, even as that which we experience at this moment seems incomplete. Our fault is that

we are too sure of our distinctions between what is and what is not. The past is made tolerable only by what might have been, by the non-existent. What we intended to say, what we were about to do, what we might have heard had we asked, what we might have seen had we looked, although we were incapable of filling these molds of potentiality, we still cherish them like the useless possessions of which you wrote in your letter.

Words, words, words. They will never say their lines. How carefully one trains them to express the right thing, and when the time comes they are dumb. However much we strain, they will not speak. I will try to speak simply then, I liked your letter, and thank you for it. I don't know whether I should try to answer it or not. Anyway, tonight I cannot, I am too tired. Perhaps tomorrow.

August 31

Another day has gone, but where, where is it? How could it transplant us so swiftly from what we were yesterday into what we are today? Plants cannot live when they are continually transplanted.— We have no seasons, but past and future converge on us in the guise of the present as though time wished to destroy us. But I wanted to answer your letter, and if I continue writing in this vein, I will never arrive at saying anything.

Now and again I wonder to myself what you would like me to say, not that I would say it to please you and pleasing you deceive you, but I am curious to know whether I would be capable of such thoughts or feelings. Your letter, I thought, was a rather good image of what I know of you. It was rather impetuous, in many places illogical, and very fervent throughout: I like it that way. But much of what you wrote about me and my ideas you cannot possibly believe yourself.

To seek pain and suffering for their own sake is perverse, but to accept pain and suffering for their own sake is altogether different. I agree with Dostoevsky that man was made to be happy, and that in happiness man achieves his highest perfection. You must admit that man is disposed not to happiness alone but to unhappiness as well, and if you consider seriously, you must agree that there is more pain than joy, more suffering than pleasure, more ugliness than beauty, more ill than good in the world. The task of the individual is to take pain and suffering and turn them into their opposite. Settembrini's method is the rational alleviation of all human ills. The encyclopedia on which he is working will make all pain superfluous, since pain is a result of ignorance, but ignorance can be alleviated by the catalogue. Naphta would have pain and suffering for their own sakes; he advocates a reign of terror to cure the world of its ills. Naphta is perverse, and Settembrini is ridiculous. Most people are grotesque in this respect, they refuse to acknowledge the reality of pain and suffering and death. They deceive the world and themselves, all for a false sense of security. The dead patients are taken away during the dinner hour, and when Hans Castorp speaks of Joachim's death, Frau Stöhr gets up to leave the table. I had a similar experience last year at Harvard when a friend of mine committed suicide after he was rejected by the medical school. University authorities did their utmost to obscure the truth, and even Alex in his good-natured way tried to convince me that it was merely an accident. The business of the mortician, who paints dead people until they look as though they were alive, is the most grotesque example I can think of in this respect.

I wish you would not be like the undertaker and varnish sorrow to look like pleasure, or when you have cried ~~to~~ paint your face to conceal the truth, or, as Americans so boldly say, always keep smiling. For these things are alike in their deception; ~~the~~ the outside can *only* conceal, but never change, the state of the inside. All the rouge of the undertaker will not put life into the corpse, and no false smile has ~~never changed~~ altered the unhappiness of the soul beneath.

This is my only objection to your existentialism →

Whatever pedagogical ideals I have for you, - if you confess yours I must confess mine too, - are only one thing: the acceptance of loneliness, suffering, and death, not as ultimate goals, but as indispensable means to a greater happiness and a more beautiful life. My first impression of you was that you were a girl who had more suffering than she knew how to cope with, and I was afraid for you that, being unable to live it, you would deny your suffering and paint over it with the cheapest kind of pleasure, that you would find security not in yourself or in any valuable person or ideal but in distraction and diversion from the most banal objects. Then you would have been grotesque, not so much in the eyes of men, though perhaps that too, as in the eyes of God, who searches the soul.

Culture, I think, is nothing but the acceptance of pain for the sake of happiness, or the acceptance of death as the way to life. That is what Hans Castorp learned on the Magic Mountain. For him life became a reconciliation with death, hence as Socrates said, a preparation for death. ~~ON XXXXX WXXXX~~ When Yeats wrote that we do not begin to live until we realize that life is tragedy, he ~~meant~~ the same thing.

September 1

You must pardon my style. The last paragraphs are particularly sore. But I am writing this letter on the installment plan and very late at night when everything around me and within me has gone to bed. This is the time when my mind, ~~anesthetized~~ anesthetized by the lateness of the hour, will suffer introspection least painfully. Now all the uncertainties and fears of daytime flee before darkness, because uncertainties and fears are the children of light and activity. Now I find concepts and ideas at least partially adequate to carry away the mountain of doubt; but for the fact that I dump them with you, you must pardon me.

There is only one more comment I want to make on your letter; we seem unable to agree on this term thankfulness. You misinterpret me when you say that I agree with my mother. What I wrote in my last letter about Frau Kaufmann's thank you notes was nothing more than a criticism of all varieties of judgment which human beings pass upon one another. I think I have mentioned before that I believe all criticism, judgment, and condemnation to be no more than progressive degrees of misunderstanding. If all things are necessary and inevitable, one must only recognize their necessity in order to see the futility of judgment.

About this matter of thankfulness I would like to argue with you purely for the sake of argument, and while I know you to be unappreciative, I think Alex will be more so, and in a way this part of my letter is more for him than it is for you.

The only good way to argue for the sake of arguing is to argue about definitions, and that precisely is what I shall do. And I shall assume you were interested enough to ask me to give a definition of thankfulness. "It is a kind of payment," I would answer. The payment is a part of a bargain, and whether a bargain is just or unjust depends upon an equal exchange of goods and services. An unequal bargain is called unjust.

I want to begin at the beginning: Equality is a very important concept among us, because in equality we recognize the prerequisite of freedom. Every man will demand equality in matters that appear supreme to him. He who believes in ambition and is not afraid of exploitation will demand equality of opportunity. He will be a capitalist. He who believes in material well-being will demand equality of wealth. We call him a communist. The man who believes in equality of mind like Settembrini will write encyclopaedias and organize school systems. You must leave me my prejudice that the soul and not the mind or the intestines is the most vital part of a man, and if you agree with me on the importance of the soul, you must also agree on the need for equality among men in all things that concern the soul.

There are two kinds of feeling: those which tend to unite men and those which tend to separate them. Of the feelings which tend to separate men there are two classes, none of which is based upon equality of the individuals concerned in the nature of their concerns; the other is based upon inequality in the nature of their concerns. The feeling which is based upon equality is always reciprocal: we call it hate. To the feelings which are one-sided and non-reciprocal we give different names, such as envy and jealousy. Likewise of the feelings which tend to unite men there are two classes, the equal and the unequal. The equal we call love, because the nature of love is that it is mutual to both individuals concerned. The unequal again has many names, such as pity, thankfulness, admiration, obedience, and flattery. It is evident that those feelings which exist in equality must be the pure feelings, and from experience we know that love and hate are stronger than any feeling in the other classes. Thus love is purer and more powerful than thankfulness. Thankfulness, being impure, must be a mixture of love and something else, which we may call a feeling of guilt or obligation. And so thankfulness is a kind of coin current in a certain kind of bargain.

All exchange may be classified into three categories, namely, giving unwillingly which is theft, giving for a price which is barter, and giving from love. Theft, because inequality is its basis, is always unjust. Giving from love must always be just because love is based on equality. Barter or sale may be either just or unjust. Of barter or sale there are two classes, one which demands a material return and one which demands an immaterial return. The kind of barter which demands a material return is giving for the sake of satisfaction. The satisfaction may vary. In one case it may be a public recognition, in another case it may be a very quiet and noble self-appreciation for having done good. Proportional to the satisfaction experienced by the giver, the recipient harbors a mixed feeling of guilt and love which is

called thankfulness.

Any kind of sale or barter is unjust when the gain or loss to the giver is greater or less than the gain or loss to the recipient. In itself, giving for an immaterial reward is not unjust, but the criteria involved are very critical. Horsetrading is not unjust either, and yet I entertain a certain prejudice toward the integrity of horsetraders. Certainly a greater thing is to give from love, spontaneously and without thought or appreciation of thankfulness in return, to give simply because one possesses something which another person lacks. He who gives lovingly gives not gladly but with a feeling of guilt for having that which another has not.

But giving for the satisfaction is prone to injustice. Consider the poor man who eats the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table. The crumbs will save the beggar's life, but for the rich man they represent no sacrifice. The rich man, having sacrificed nothing, has no cause to feel satisfaction, and yet the beggar, having gained everything has much cause to be thankful. The exchange is unequal, hence unjust, and being unjust it engenders illness of the soul. Nothing, in this case, would be more natural than for the rich man to assume that he had made a sacrifice to save the beggar's life and to become a hypocrite. Actually the beggar himself would have sacrificed his dignity to save his life, and in the face of the rich man, he would have no recourse but to become a sycophant. Except he do it from love, no one has the right to save another's life and still live on; because how could he pay for the satisfaction of having saved a life, unless by giving his own.

The preceding goes to show merely that there are many things which one must do, if one do them purely from love, and without expectation of gratitude. And if gratitude still be expressed, it should not gratify but make ashamed. The inequality between the rich man and the beggar can be resolved by either of them. It would rarely happen, but if the rich man loved the beggar, he might give him more than the crumbs; giving from love, he would give all he had. (Then he would no longer be a rich man.) But independently if the poor man would transfer his gratitude from the rich man, who is unworthy of it, to God from whom he first received his life, he would do well. Then the beggar would see in the rich man an agent, a representative, perhaps even a reflection of God, and he could do the rich man no greater honor. Toward God, however, he should be thankful, and in his thankfulness to God he would have dignity before men, for thankfulness to God is love.

September 2

I know you will not be interested in this long discussion about gratitude, and, I admit, I wrote it for the exercise and for my own pleasure. Meanwhile another strange day has passed, stranger than most. Mother and I went to buy some clothes for myself, but found none, not because there were none, but because I really did not want them. I went through the motions of looking at and commenting upon the material, I tried on a few suits, all the while conscious that if I had my way, I would never buy them. My attitude toward new clothes is symbolical for my attitude to most things, even the greatest and most vital. I go through the motions; in themselves they are very painful. I feel ashamed of myself, and sorry for the salesman who thinks he is interesting me in his wares. I mutter a few apologies before going home.

My words will never find an end if they have their own way. When I get back to Cambridge, I will have much less time for effusions like these. There is much I would like to write you about, but it will be easier to talk about most things. Have you ever read Dostoi-evsky's The Brothers Karamasoff? Nothing I have read recently has impressed me as much. The Magic Mountain is a very deep book. What do you think of the portraits of Dr. Behrens and Dr. Krokowski? You think they are not vivid and true to life? Or Frau Stöhr? I would be interested in your evaluation of Clawdia Chauchat, of her importance to Th. Mann and to Hans Castorp.

Whether it is good or bad, I don't know, but you are to my thoughts as a candle is to insects. Good night. I shall go to bed now, and think, until I fall asleep. In a way, I would like you to know my thoughts, and yet it is better you should not.

Good night!

Forster

Good Night, 30