

Cambridge, December 3, 1949

Dear Margaret,

Alex has just left. He and Forster had come over for a glass of beer; now they have gone and all is quiet again. Now I must make another attempt at writing you. The incompleteness of my thinking complicates the task; just before they came I tore up a fairly long letter to you, not because it contained anything wrong or false, but merely because I think its content would have troubled you. What shall I write you? Should I tell you about my seminar paper that turned out to be a success? - it means very little. If I wrote you about my work at all, I could speak only of the fervent desire to work harder, to accomplish more, to lose myself in my studies, and the depressing consciousness that I cannot learn everything, that I will soon have forgotten most of what I know now, and that what I remember either now or at any other time is empty and meaningless.

I could tell you about the books I am reading, because in many of them I find my own thoughts and experiences intensified. The English translation of a book about Rilke called "Rilke and Benvenuto" has just appeared. I believe that you would like it very much and that it might help you in your search of that which you call happiness and serenity. A new translation of Rilke's great novel "Malte Laurids Brigge" was published this month by Norton. When Rilke wrote this work he hoped that it would be his last, the final purgation of his tortured soul, that he should have to write no more. But it turned out to be only the beginning of much greater sufferings. It is a kind of autoanalysis of the soul, the story of very great suffering.

When you write me that "La Porte Étroite" made you unhappy and anxious, I blame myself for having given it to you. Please do not misunderstand me; the place that I marked I remember well. I was thinking of you at the time. The books we read are no more real than our apprehensions or fears. They are not necessarily reality, but they make us aware of the potentialities of life; they are the objectivation of the prayer: Not my will but Thine be done. They tell us more of ourselves than we could ever otherwise have learned, not what we are so much as what we might have been. But even so they contain fragments of us, and these we must not deny, but bear them calmly and with a silent dignity.

Margaret, I have no cure for your discouragement and anxiety, except my offer to help you bear them. Try to detach them from all pettiness and ugliness and do your utmost to refine them into a serene and unshakable consciousness of the suffering of all mankind and they shall be the most intimate bond between you and God. You can do nothing worse than to try to escape from them into banal and superficial relations of certain kinds of friendship. But why am I writing in the imperative? I am not trying to reform you or correct you or ask you to sacrifice a part of your personality to me. Nothing is more absurd and selfish. Only, you would make me happy if ever you could use me as a means to becoming as you most want to be.

Dec. 3, 1941

You are not right, in thinking that I set myself up as teacher or judge over you. Only my need of you makes me want you to be where I can always find you. There are some spheres of intellectual and spiritual existence into which I cannot follow you. I wish you would not go there. Sometimes I feel so close to you that if I turned around you might be standing behind me and looking over my shoulder. For me you are like a mirror in which I see the disparate elements of myself unified in a whole, and your distortion magnifies my own deformities. I am fragmentary and I give myself to you part by part and ask you to collect me and keep me safe and not lose me or misplace me, but sometime to give me back to myself.

I could well be ashamed of the extent to which my thought circles about you. Sometimes I find you and sometimes not. You are right when you say that we should examine each other less when we are together. I have an almost pathological desire to examine my own motives, as if I could find out by self-inspection where the contradiction is. You must be patient with me, and you must make sure that our friendship is not doing you some great harm. As for me, I am content to examine the meaning of each chapter as I read it, and to finish the book, however tortuous the way may be.

I am looking forward to your coming; it will mean a great deal to me. But you must come only if you feel that I am not harming you. Now I am very tired, and I shall go to bed that I may be able to work hard and long tomorrow night. I shall try to write soon again. Thank you very much for your letter; you are very good to me.

John

When you write me that "La Porte Héroïque" made you unhappy and anxious, I blame myself for having given it to you. Please do not misunderstand me; the place that I marked I remember well. I was thinking of you at the time. The books we read are no more real than our apprehensions or fears. They are not necessarily reality, but they make us aware of the potentialities of life; they are the objection of the prayer: Not my will but Thine be done. They tell us more of ourselves than we could ever otherwise have learned, not what we are so much as what we might have been. But even so they contain fragments of us, and these we must not deny, but bear them calmly and with a silent dignity.

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