

January 11, 1950

Dear John,

This letter will be begun but not finished now in the hope that you will write me something more that will be easier to answer or let me tell you about the few beautiful things I see around me. For this will be a sort of rebuke and explanation, quite gentle and tired and hopeless. The teacher is tired. She has explained the development of Gothic architecture (and its beauty), the difference between the achievements of Cavour and Mazzini (and the fact that she considers Mazzini a more admirable person), and the facts of the Constitution-- all these with considerable clarity and apparent success. But there are things which cannot be explained, not because they are inexplicable but because the person to whom they are being explained will not understand. A teacher succeeds the more easily because the student knows there is an examination in two weeks. Furthermore, the student trusts the teacher as an opener of the doors of knowledge-- even when the student dislikes the teacher. But I have no midyear examination, and you do not trust me though you seem to like me. Since your principal preoccupation is with truth, it is difficult to see why you do.

How deeply I am penetrated with the vices of scholasticism! I cannot begin to write to you about these things, which are really very simple, without a preface and stupid melodramatic literary devices; I would be gentle and patient and explain to you slowly and carefully as I explained adverbial clauses this afternoon. I did not expect to succeed then, but I did; the children trusted me, and blamed their confusion on themselves or the teacher last year. But you tempt me into acrobatics with literary devices. So much of what we feel seems to be expressed symbolically. The symbols are sometimes beautiful and enrich our relationship, but sometimes I think they obscure the reality. Books, bridges, doors, circles--I have the symbols for the beautiful mythology with which I can occupy my mind when you finally shut the door and swallow the key. But now I must resist the temptation to convert your metaphors to my own uses; it is very hard.

Do you know this verse of Markham's:

"He drew a circle that shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout,
But love and I had the wit to win,
We drew a circle that took him in."

It is not very beautifully expressed, but it is something that I have often thought about, though I do not think that I have before in connection with you. Nor do I really think it illustrative now, because I think no longer in terms of enclosed spaces.

I think I am more withdrawn from the world than I have ever been before--but not to a place, a circle or a room with a door. It is rather a place to which I am going, and which I will never reach. To me your empty

(except for you) room with its door is in its way as unreal a place to be as the great houses full of people which other people build for themselves. You have locked out the whole world; they have locked out all but a few of the millions. Neither you nor they will be safe ~~from~~ from whatever you fear behind your doors. I know that I am "a stranger and a sojourner" wherever I am, whether in the big houses or in your room. No matter where I should ~~try~~ to build myself a house, I could not; for if I did the investment of my time and energy in the constuction would make me feel that I should settle down and behave like any other member of the solid middle class who believes that what is, is what should be.-----No for some reason I have not been able to express it; I really do not know why I cannot accept your symbol of the door, with its enclosed space. Perhaps you can see in my confusion my nearness to the answer, as I can in reading my class's examinations.

Peñhhaps I am not remembering "La Porte Etroite" correctly, but in retrospect one of the things that troubled me was the idea that two people should think ever it possible to walk together down (or up) the road to salvation. It is neither possible nor necessary for their relationship together. Neither can save the other, nor can they hold a three-sided relationship with God. It is not a tea-party. ^{at least} Without the knowledge and understanding that each of them is alone with God--and that the aloneness and communion exists, their human relationship will be diminished in significance and perhaps impossible.

I do not think that I side with what "hurts and depresses" you; nor do I preserve a "benevolent neutrality" In some matters I have thought that you were wrong; in those cases I think that the other people are probably also wrong. Unfortunately, as usual, I cannot think of specifid instances, except such details as lipstick, and have a suspicion that your attitude is as vague and unspecific, and that you group me with every one else simply because I am not you -- and you know of the very bad and damaging mistakes that I have made. But to judge either you or the rest of the world seems to me to be a diversion from the goal to which I should be directed which is to be a Christian. I have not found in the New Testament any demand for measurement by any standard than that of Christ--and it is not the others, but rather oneself that is to be measured. The world is certainly bad, and you are certainly better for me than anything else I have seen erring through it. But it is not my job to sit and measure your goodness and its badness. I must simply continue to go in the diredtion that I know to be right.

I know that your idea of life is not a stationary one--not one that can be adequately expressed in metaphors of doors and rooms or houses. But you are so preoccupied

with the problems of shutting doors and defending places which should be, at best, a night's lodging. I might say proudly that if you are so preoccupied with these problems that I will say thank you and go on. But the metaphor is so false and inadequate, and I know how far I am from the goal and how tired and discouraged. So you are for me something quite different. A bridge will not do either, because any history student, in fact even babies, playing games, know that people built their homes on London Bridge. I must not be beguiled by the meanings I can read into your metaphor. So the truth is so simple and so impossible to express symbolically -- that I have felt encouraged and felt it possible to go where I want to go. And more than that, I have felt drawn to the reality of your truth and pain and have wanted to fill whatever part of the need it is possible for a human being to fill.

Now, I have written more than I intended, and it seems to say very little. Perhaps the most that it can say to you is that I care enough to sit here for more than two hours while my back hurts and I know that I have hours of hard work that must be done. All I wanted to say, quite humbly, was that you are wrong to ask me to judge; and that I have judged and chosen to this extent: that I know that I need you now. But do not feel the weight of that need more than you can bear; I also know that I will be taken care of if you cannot bear it.

After all, I will send this now. I have so much to do for the next few days that I will not be able to write, no matter what I think. Tell me whenever you know about the Medical School, and whatever you want to say whether it is troubled or calm, pleasant or painful. My busyness will prevent me from indulging in self-pity even if my faith is inadequate. So you see it is safe to say anything or nothing.

Dors bien,

Margaret