

MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE
Middlebury, Vermont

American Literature Department
R. L. Cook

Sierra Madre, California

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Dear Peter:

Once in a blue moon one receives a letter like yours. It was a splendid one, and the tardiness of my reply is not in the least attributable to lack of appreciation. But you guessed it - the reason why you have not heard previously from me. I have been digging in to try to beat what might happen to curb my work out here. I did not receive your letter until after "the much punch" at Pearl Harbor. Then I thought there might be immediate changes. There were a few; we had some real and some "phony" blackouts, and much preparation for things to come. In January we broke camp at Palo Alto, where I had been working in the Stanford library, and struck out for Southern California and a little of the much-sought sunshine. We got it and out of a good form when' weather - now we've had only two light rains neither of which would do any more than curl a baby's hair and a few days of fog down inland from the Pacific. The rest has been clear, resplendent sunshine, so strong that objects stand out boldly; the kind of sunlight Cozanne liked down in Provence, the kind the artists have around Taos, New Mexico.

We are in a little town, which luckily we discovered, that lies just at the base of the San Gabriel range, a long - east-west - big, broad-shouldered range whose highest point is Mt. Wilson (eight miles up the winding trail that starts a hundred yards from our front door). Below us is the San Gabriel Valley, perhaps five or six miles wide and at its westernmost point touches the Pacific. And at this point is Los Angeles.

and its multiple suburbs, Glendale, Burbank, Long Beach, Santa Monica, Hollywood, etc. But before we reach Los Angeles we pass through Pasadena, just some miles distant and it is in a suburb of Pasadena - San Marino that the big Truman home - the Huntington Library - is located. This is, of course, why we have come down here to be near the library and to get a little more walk time. The University of Southern California and the University of California at Los Angeles are both on the outskirts of the city, as so it seems, and consequently are inaccessible. We have to worry about them constantly and bit by bit we feel as though our life was growing more and more hummed in since the 17th of December.

As I sit writing this letter to you the sound of a working bird in a language back outside my wide window is almost dizzying in its intensity; porcupines are brilliantly burning by the green hedge, tall cedars and unusually attractive palm line the border of the walk. Outside, the Acacia trees are in blossom and the bees are busily alive in the eucalyptus trees. When I go for a hike on the Mountain Trails I pass ~~hundreds~~ in purple banks, bamboo stands, cactus all plants, Mexican bayonet, and, of course, the omnipresent cacti. Quail and deer are abundant in the hills, and the kind of hawk Robinson Jeffers is so fond of about that struts all of a piece on the top of the air column and ride them so grandly. Of an afternoon or I walk along the Twisting Trail I have a view from the ravine a few more twists in front of me, and now brought by looking widely, I will catch a glimpse of the hawk on outstretched wings. Once or I was turning a bend on one of the trails, high up, I came upon a hawk that I might almost have touched by stretching out and it was then riding a pillar of air which rose from the ravine deep beneath. The hawk was a brown fellow with a curiously small body and with short blunt wings. But he rode that air like a ship's business, his wings unbanding, while below in the chamber of the ravine the wild pigeons took cover from one holly cluster and flew with a pigeon's desperate abandon toward another holly cluster, their wings a flutter of motion. Grand Olden Hopkins would have liked these hawks; perhaps

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the wild pigeon also. Then too, there's the murmur along the trail from the Mesquite as the hot sun draws ~~it~~ ^{its} head upon it and the light inland breeze blows the scent upward. Day by day the sun grows hotter and it takes little persuasion to me that by June this country will be intolerably hot. But even the sun-impacted air is tonic and the green orange groves in the valley below are enticing. Back there in Middlebury it must be different and either you are subdued by the clean, continuous cold or you look forward for the shimmering green and the song of birds.

There are many times when I think of Middlebury and of the people there. I have the intensity of reaction ^{which} comes but when I am a little distant from the object of my contemplation. And the degree of intensity sometimes depends upon the greater or lesser distance. Three thousand miles is just about right in this case, and I find the intense kind of reaction, one, by the way, that should not be confused with nostalgia. I could be dropped anywhere in the United States and feel at home so greatly because we travelled over its surface. It all seems familiar; I eat it like bread and drink it like wine.

The different feelings - one of strangeness - was felt strongly while we were in Mexico. The brilliantly beautiful tropical and subtropical landscape fascinated us and the shy, little withdrawn town people interested us very much, but there was a smell to the land and an atmosphere characteristically Mexican that put us off and we felt only this mysterious strangeness related like some strong pungent scent from an unstoppered bottle.

By way of contrast with the American scene Mexico was a revitalizing experience. We saw flocks of green parrots rising from the tropical river beds and this was like Gile in the Congo or Garguin in the South Sea or Thordar-Barnum,

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even. And we saw Goya's bullfighting in Mexico City, and honest-to-goodness
Rivera and Orozco's - dozens of the former's paintings and murals, in Mexico City
and Cuernavaca. We saw the brilliant Popo from Taxco just before the usual mass
morning clouds obscured it. And I say to you, Peter, that for the good of the art which
you nourish [~~that~~] you should try to see Mexico. And I think you should not read
any books about it. You should come to it when very very tired and you should just
move within its rhythm - the rhythm of ~~manana~~ - of the little brown people who in
themselves are many-faceted. The Pyramids of the Sun, the Spanish-like landscape,
the wide fields of maize, the turbid river, the plantations of banana and lemon, the
sugar cane fields, the dogs and chickens the skin in the clear weather, the bamboo
huts with the turkeys and dogs and goats and the wild-looking people in them, the orchids
and multi-colored butterflies would be just as enchanting to you as they were to me. This
was the country that stimulated Hemingway and before him Katherine Anne Porter
(do you know her Flowering Judas?). There are many artists around and it is not
difficult to explain their presence. When you are choked with smoke, hike to Mexico.
Perhaps it was our seeing Mexico after the West that made the trip all the
important interesting. But to think to be alive and not to see the Louisiana Delta
Country or the Big Bend Country in Texas or the Saguaro Country of Southern
Florida or the Monterey peninsula of California! Each one is a realm for poets or
writers that is inexhaustible. Talk about America! We mean the many Americas.
What might happen here in October to come makes my hair stand up; but in
June, either. If we can see this present time through and ~~and~~ ^{before} some measure of
justice and reason and tolerance, we shall have all the more conviction about our
common ideal and all the more justification for the literature we write in terms of
our existence. But I would not separate the person from the time. The writing
should carry in its grain that ^{universal} range of a common national experience. And is why I
note The Brothers Karamazov (which is about Russia as much as it is about one family,
and about man as much as it is about a family) and The tragic Grandin and very
and Peace so highly; they do not dodge the issues of their times or epochs.

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They are right up smack against the biggest sort of inducement. So with my eyes looking over the Big Bend Country and my heart embedded in its gazing plain, I reach out to meet the issue of a world which lacks political unity and whose economic situation is immensely more unified. The whole ^{meaning of the} fight right now seems to me to be centered on one point, whether or not you care or shall have only one way or two or possibly three ways of life. And the Americans or Allied powers no less than the Axis powers are agreed on one point: that there must be only one way - either the democratic or the totalitarian. The world is no longer satisfied apparently with the anomaly of independent uniting; it really wants unity not diversity. And to us the slavery of the German is vile and detestable, while the integrity-respecting, democratic unity of our people is laudable. What books will be written to this theme, books that will do with the air what Henry Dick does with the sea, books that will be written as Emerson said of Dante's Divine Comedy in "Colonial Epitaph". We are being moved by strange and powerful forces in our day. The other night I heard Sandberg in the Los Angeles Philharmonic Auditorium. Well, he didn't get out very far nor in very deep but he said something that I think really hit home. He said that an interesting thing happened to him while he was working on his Lincoln study, ~~the~~ the long, long study of newspaper files, diaries, etc., etc. It came over him gradually that the people of Lincoln's day had no real sense of what was happening. They had no feeling or intuition about the deep underground channels operating beneath the surface. There were those, like Sumner, who had no sense of the deep and underlying streams. Sandberg read 18 volumes of Sumner's works and in nearly every page there was nobody home. "Yet the things Sumner thought he knew that time has proved not to be true!" But there were a few - a minority - whose utterance stands

Good to-day. And now were the writings of Alexander Stephens and Robert E. Lee and Abraham Lincoln. Scudder's remarks impressed me deeply. I think, Peter, that he said something - really said something. How many of us realize in all the complexity and in all the import those forces which are at work in our time? And is it not an intuitive realization which historical analyses of Spengler or Toynbee or Beard only help to make more emphatic? But we have to find it the way T.S. Eliot said so brilliantly that the writer has to write "not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order". We have to feel with that depth, with that range of feeling and understanding - sentimentally, intuitively.

I am terribly afraid you will find this cursive handwriting almost going; perhaps you will never get this book. It is one of the chief deterrents to letter-writing for me. Yet I cannot tell you how much such letters as yours mean to me. I think you know a little of how much strength and quality I think you have; much, I think, remains to be done. The putting up is a day-in, day-out sort-of-thing and then the patience and persistence counts for more than inspiration. I say this to you for the post-college days. The book with the book for awhile; get out, see your country, learn around, work up experience external to you - the objective world, and keep away from isolation and the cage. More poets have been drowned in the cage than in all the richness of all the open air of all the world. The book with the city; stick with the new culture, like Robert Frost who got there or got there, or the case may be, on their or his own.

So let me hear from you. I shall try not to keep silence as unbearably long again. Let me have a copy of Directions. Tell your ambassador and then by writing a little. Get ready for the big work, would you also read me Max Frost's address and if you see him you know what regard I send him - he's ready up there, and "all the fun" in watching him climb those pine by pine, look by look.

Sierra Madre, California
Bella Vista Apartment #6

Robt Cook