

December 26, 1963

dear Caesar,

I've been anticipating writing this letter and adding ~~imaginary~~ content to it since the first hour of my arrival in New York. In my imagination it has expanded into a novel and I have often used the idea of it as a filter through which to order and control the overwhelming amount and depth of experience that sometimes threatens to ~~erase~~ sweep away my identity and stability like the crowds on the IRT. It's all very literary: the return to home and an accumulated past from a timeless and pastoral world (Palo Alto/Eldorado) where there is no slush on the streets or confusion to dream about. Yes, you are right, this certainly is more real; and not only in the sense of more awful, but also because there is more plain being: things, events, life, good, evil. After living for an extended period away from New York for the first time, I now have a clear sense of what it means. What a tremendously significant, important and symbolic choice it is, eventually to decide whether or not to return permanently. There is very little doubt in my mind now that California, or at least our version of it, is the Good Life, and that New York (and Cambridge, Mass.) certainly is not. Yes I want the Good Life, but I want it for everyone (there is no confusion of values) and I wish that the Bad Life didn't exist. If I could press a button now and convert New York to San Francisco and Stanford, I would, ~~immediately~~ without hesitation. Illness and suffering and dehumanization and ugliness are bad. A merciful climate, soul- and body-room, lemon trees, are good; both in ~~themselves~~ themselves and because for some people they lead to even higher goods like productivity, peace of mind, ~~and~~ disinterested morality, and knowledge. But I can't press that button and thus the ~~question~~ question remains problematic: do you, like Dick Dill, for instance, sink into the maelstrom and threaten and perhaps kill the very values you are trying to establish, or do you turn your back, forget about the Reality and cultivate them in your own life.

This all sounds terribly hackneyed; it was my experience of seeing Caldwell that gave it real meaning. I had spent quite a bit of time with him in the last couple of years, but it was almost always strained and uncomfortable for me. His strange mannerisms and the incredible nervous tension that seemed to be stretching him on the rack made me distrustful and afraid of him and created a barrier between us which prevented me from ever thinking of him as a friend. This is all gone now. Caldwell's mind has rendered his body, or his non-body, superfluous. A year ago it would have seemed ~~impossible~~ impossible for me to conceive, but now it does make sense. He would <sup>have</sup> not been better off dead; what he still has is much more important than what he has lost, for it has grasped, as none of us can, and encompassed that loss. He has not turned away and denied the Absurd, as we did after a few hours of brooding about it; he has passed through to the other side. We <sup>(you and I)</sup> spoke on occasion ~~of~~ about largeness of soul; the capacity to really know. It seems to me that this is what he has. And if this is not all ~~xxx~~ illusory and such a thing as greatness of spirit does exist, then he should live; then life is something, then New York is horrible, for it ~~xxx~~ makes people sick in spirit, ~~in that great mind~~ and in mind.

The B. S. seems to be some kind of watershed. I have encountered so many people, among them several old friends, who after their graduations from college last June, ~~with~~ for one reason or another finally succumbed to the problems that we all had to cope with and managed to dilute with

the anxieties of work due , cynicism,enthusiasm, nausea, sex and pedantry, that sometimes I feel like I'm walking around a hospital or a graveyard. The ~~xxxxxxx~~ configuration of appearance and reality here is just the opposite of what I found in the Neurological center of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. Here the core is foul and the surface is shiny; here all power and value is destroyed despite the beauty of the body; here there is no sense or purpose in living. I'm writing this paragraph a few days after the first two and trying to explain to myself my reaction to New York as an abstraction. I attribute the corrosion of mind and spirit that I see to its atmosphere and I attribute the horror of my reaction to their destruction to their realization in Caldwell. I haven't read Paul Goodman, but I remeber hearing, probably from Tristman, that he ~~xxxxxxxx~~ <sup>connects</sup> the loss of sexual potency with the loss of all other creative potentialities like work, understanding and affection. Why am I such a horse's ass: it's the Waste Land I'm talking about. ~~xx~~ So it's an older cliché and one that everybody knows. Nevertheless it's new and real to me for the first time.

This is one of the rare occasions that I'm at home with my parents; I spend most of the vacation living at Ellen's , under what are, to ~~xx~~ say the least, somewhat unresolved circumstances. She still has a boyfriend and lots of other callers whose paths I try my best to avoid, and of whom I am intensely jealous, but only for the period of my stay. One of them is an old and close friend of mine. The whole thing is a murky quagmire where the cleansing and clarifying rays of morality penetrate here and there only by accident. Despite the difficulties I am often very happy and ~~xx x~~ until now at least, think it was the right thing to come ~~xxxxxx~~ back. I saw Nancy W. twice before she left with her husband for Hawaii for the rest of the vacation. She says that she will come out to live alone in Palo Alto at the end of January. If this sounds incomprehensible or contradictory to you, there is nothing I know or can add to give it more sense. My dealings with her have translated themselves from French to English and fortunately my heart doesn't hang as much on the impossible outcome as it used to.

I've done a minimal amount of work or reading (By now I expect you've finished Aristotle, Wallace Stevens and the complete works of Yvor Winters) but it doesn't bother me too much. Final exams made me smug. The few preparations for English A that I'm working on really get me all hot and bothered to begin teaching.

I expected at first to write a real marathon letter, but the easier prospect of sitting around and bullshitting over a bottle of bourbon in ten days discourages me from continuing.

Happy New Year and a retroactive Merry Christmas,

S.