

Letter from Arthur to Mary Prior, 28 April, 1945¹

Letter 130²

Sat 28/4/45
NZ 421486
ACI Prior (N.V)
No. 5 Squadron
NZAPO 361.

Mary Darling,

I finished my last to you earlier this evening, hurrying a little toward the end of it in order to get stuck into the first instalment of your new draft of “The Apocalypse of Ismael”³ But the first reading of this didn’t take as long as I anticipated, and there is still a fair bit of evening left to go on writing to you. Though I was working today, I seem to have unconsciously organized things pretty well. It’s such a contrast to last night – I was fidgety, waiting for mail, & as it was delivered late, wasted a fair bit of time that way, & then when it arrived there was none for me, & I had to squeeze my letter – writing into what time was left, & hadn’t terribly much to say either. Though this new draft has made me feel that some of what I did say was pretty much to the point; particularly my feeling about the relevance of Heiden’s description of Hitler⁴ method of manipulating ‘moral necessity’ to our description of Ahab’s. It is not just, as Edwards [2] tended to make it, an ingenious presentation of rational motives to rational minds in order to make useful machines of them. There are more devilish tricks; playing with people’s sane[?] divisions & deliberately intensifying them to make them inward & outward slaves – making them “accomplices” & using their resulting sense of guilt to make them more so – turning despair and lassitude into active enthusiasm for evil & ..aginess[?]. This is the sort of trick that has been played in real life on the German people & a lot of other people too; & God knows how it started – Hitler himself begins as a “void”, reflecting the “void” around him; he is made by it, and makes it in his turn. There’s a glimpse into this sort of thing in Knight’s essay on Hamlet, “the Ambassador of Death”; but much more than a glimpse in “Moby Dick”.

My first impression of your draft installment is of a mass of your suggestive material in which the connections are not quite clear. They may be made clearer by the material that follows them; or I may come to see them more clearly on later readings of this material. You have made the importance of “Mardi” very evident, & some sort of brief [3] summary of the book – not necessarily of its plot (if it has one), but of points like who Babbalanja is, where Mardi is or what its supposed to be, etc. – might be helpful. But this is only a first impression; I’ll make more responsible comments & suggestions later. – The installment also suggests just what Melville did with Edwards’ – what he accepted from him, how he transformed it, etc. – but I’ll be looking into this later to see if it needs to be put any more clearly, &c – It is a “morish” piece of writing; I am looking forward to what follows it. – Incidentally, I have found before that the clarity of your writing, I mean the “pattern” of it or something like that, is a thing that doesn’t strike one at first reading, but does grow on one later. And I can see from this draft the difficulty that you mention is one of your letters – the difficulty of keeping particular subjects within their own bounds, & and “saving up” particular lines of

¹ Editors’ note: This letter has been edited by David Jakobsen. It is part of the Ann Prior Collection, kept at The Bodleian Library in Oxford, box 12.558-4, folder 3, April, item 130. The letter is written on standard writing paper from ‘National Patriotic Fund Board for New Zealand’.

² Editor’s note: Arthur Prior has numbered his letters to Mary and uses them for reference.

³ Editor’s note: Prior first wrote, but then crossed out, “Moby Dick”.

⁴ Editor’s note: Heiden, Konrad (1944) ‘Der Führer’.

thought for their proper places, & so forth. Maybe it would help you to write more freely if you didn't bother about this too much – follow ideas as they come to you; & I'll suggest ways of ordering them later. [4]

I'm reading your letter again now more slowly; or at least am starting to do so. I am both reading and writing under slight difficulties – there are a crowd of chaps a bit under the weather not far away, stumming on the piano & singing songs like "You are my Sunshine" & that bloody sing about sailing far across the sea & such like – one has to be very far gone to be able to stand them; the songs sway & [lurk?]⁵ about like the singers. But I remain here in the YM; comfort especially something to lean my back against, is more helpful to reading & writing than quiet.

It's good news about Uncle Jack getting such good results from his "medical examination". I have duly jotted that down under "Aunt Ruth" in my Notes for Letters to write to people!

You seem to have been out at night so much lately that I'm beginning to think you really like it. If you do – maybe in general, maybe at the moment – I should imagine it's a good idea to go out. It's nice to read of your popping in on people like Miss. Boyd, & especially if your enjoying it; & then of the memories evoked by this little place & that. [5]

And of course I do remember that first morning I came down after we were engaged, & your meeting me at the station. I was somehow feeling quite shy toward you, & remarked how you put me at my ease when I encountered you again in person. And I remember the visit to the Museum, & later on to the Savoy, & coming down the Savoy steps we saw "[Cho?]⁶ Jowell and Dorothy Cassie, from Harewood, & they saw us too, & spoke about it to me afterward. I remember Harold "warning" me against you that morning, & our [?]⁷ forth immediately to get that ring. I always link that conversation with Harold with one I had with him a year before, about atheism, Clare & whatnot. I think about the last thing I said to him in that conversation was that I had cast so much away; but that I felt that I might now be capable even of enthusiasm. And then that morning with you – I think it was the first time I'd seen Harold since we were engaged – I told him that I had found something to be enthusiastic about, or rather someone – you. [6]

Keith and Beryl would be nice visitors too, even if they did keep you up late again. I sure am two up on him; but I had about a years start on him anyway – he was at the stage of going on unhappy false tracks on the night we had that long conversation, & he really did a lot less of that than I did. – And Beryl's making pyjamas for him is reminiscent of all the long fun we had with you making them for me, & how very ingenious you were in finding the material for them. I imagine I'm going to need those when I come home – after this climate up here; even though I do were no pyjamas at all here.

It's good to that Martin does see as many people as he does even if they are not a great number altogether.

It was a sound idea washing those trinkets I send. I hope it didn't spoil what little polish they had. I was told when I was making them that Brasso thoroughly polished gives a great finish to the outside of coconut; but was reluctant to do that with a thing for Martin – thought he might get poisoned or something. But I have since seen a piece of coconut finished in that way, & it really is marvelous; the white lines [7] or streaks are preserved & the wood itself goes a sort of deep purple color, & ever so smooth & shiny & glazed⁸, and I can't imagine the stuff getting sucked out of it; a rather wish I'd used it now, & on the betelnuts too.

⁵ Editor's note: The word is unclear

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⁷ Editor's note: The word is unclear

⁸ Editor's note: The word is unclear

By the way, in that draft installment you have made excellent, and effective use of Boswell's phrase about "chains of leather." – The installment also contains a number of questions to me about the source of odd quotations, which I'll answer bit by bit.

About the logical connection between Fatalism and Defiance. The logical connection Fatalism & Pride may be summed up in this way: Fatalism identifies everything that is & happens, including ones own will & deeds, with God's will. And any identification reads both ways. So a fatalist can say in despair, "I have no real will of my own, & am only a puppet in the hands of Destiny." But he can equally say, "My smallest caprice is the decree of the Almighty – the point to which the whole chain of Destiny has moved – God's will & mine are continuous." And if the fatalist has a will to defy fate, he may say in despair, "Even my will to defy is pre-determined, so fate still wins in the end, & the most complete kind of victory." But with the next breath he can pluck up his pride and say, "But after all it is not only I who am defying fate – in my predestinated defiance, fate is defying [8] itself" – he can even say, in a sense, since it really is his own will to defy fate, "I am forcing fate to defy itself, I am dragging the whole chain of Destiny behind me in this defiance, so the final victory is mine", and again it is the most complete kind of victory. That is Ahab's method of whistling to keep his courage up; what drags it down again is possibly a lurking doubt as to whether it really is his own will to defy fate – whether he would not really rather be doing something else, such as gathering his spermaceti & getting back to where his vial of Nantucket sand came from, this insane chase being imposed on him by a force that is not himself.*⁹

This ambiguity in Fatalism is briefly discussed in Barth's "Doctrine of the Word of God." I think it is in §4, at any rate its in the section with the subsections "The Word of God & Man", "The Word of God & Experience", "The Word of God and Faith"; & I think its in the subsection "The Word of God and Man"; and you could probably locate exact page by looking up "Pelagius" in the index of authors, or "Pelagianism" in the index of subjects – most probably the former (it wouldn't help much to look up Augustine", as he has about fifty references to him; but in the passage I have in mind he says that both Augustinianism and Pelagianism contains the seed of pride – I think he finds a "proud Augustinianism" in Schleiermacher).

Love and Love and Love

Arthur

Kisses to Martin.

A.N.P¹⁰

⁹ Written in the left margin: "& then of course he realizes that this "force that is not himself" is himself too, & there's all horror [the word is unclear] of his divided self.

¹⁰ Written in the bottom right of the page.