

v.1
April 1 (letter 13)

Dear Colleague:

Marguerite Yourcenar is the only woman member of the prestigious Academie Francaise. In a series of interviews, collected under the title With Open Eyes (Beacon Press, 1984), she was asked, among many other things which I will pick up later, what she had learned from her American students. Her reply is not very encouraging. "How few are prepared for study, how many never escape the status quo, and how brief is the period of awakening." Yourcenar says that students who show promise of intelligence or even brilliance are seldom able to sustain their enthusiasm. They tend to be "overwhelmed by life."

Now, what does it mean to be "overwhelmed by life"? It sounds like something that one would not want. But then, does one prefer to be "underwhelmed"? Clearly not. So the trouble lies not with the word overwhelmed--for one does not fear being overwhelmed by praise or love--but with the word life, which is sometimes conceived as a succession of frustrating demands. A fine example of this burdened notion of life appears in an autobiographical note of the short-story writer Raymond Carver. He was recalling his life as an impoverished married student with two young children. One day he had to do the family laundry at the laundromat and also pick up the children at an appointed hour. He was late for the appointment, but he could not leave the laundromat; he had to wait his turn at the dryer. He waited for half an hour without success: someone always beat him to it. So he decided to sit right in front of one dryer. At last it stopped, and just as he was about to open it, a woman came, opened the window, felt the wash within, closed the window and turned on the machine again. Raymond Carver said that he almost cried in frustration, in part because he felt that he would never be able to escape, even for brief moments, life's ceaseless demands. He felt overwhelmed. (Fires 1984, pp. 23-24).

One way to escape from being overwhelmed is to simplify life to the maximum extent possible. Here is a well known anecdote concerning Einstein--that great simplifier of life. When he was asked why he used a handsoap rather than a shaving lotion to shave himself with, he replied: "Two soaps? That's too complicated." For most of us, however, life is involvement with things and, above all, with other people. Without such involvement we are as forlorn as a dry leaf in a wintry parking lot, and not, as we might hope, a pure intelligence wrestling passionately alone with the mystery of the universe.

I end with another quotation from Yourcenar: "Wouldn't Saint Paul's in Rome be wonderful in ruins, while it is merely overwhelming in its present gilt splendor?" (p. 36).

Best wishes,

J. Z.