

January 1, 1987 (vol. 2, no. 11)

Dear Colleague:

New Year Day is of course a pure human invention. Leave Madison for the woods and it becomes immediately obvious that nature takes no notice of January 1 whatsoever. Yet so strong is the sense that nature ought to mark the day in some special way that I find myself disbelieving its apparent indifference.

Human nature is a puzzle in many ways. Outstanding among the puzzles is our ability to worship that which we have made ourselves as though it were God or some power that exists quite independently of us. The best known historical example is the worship of the Golden Calf. How could the Israelites bow down before something that they themselves had conceived and diligently manufactured when there was right before them--Jehovah? Well, on second thought, isn't Jehovah Himself also a human conception--a product of the fertile minds of the Israelites? A modern analogy might be this. Students bow down before Science Hall. I tell them: "Stop such foolishness! Science Hall is a mere human creation. Look up the hill to the real thing--real power--Bascom Hall!" Yet even Bascom Hall has a human origin.

Dependence--awareness of it makes us inclined to worship. Our greatest creations depend on an original insight that seems to come down to us from another Realm. It is psychologically understandable why we can bow down before our own works as though we have little to do with their existence. Joyce Cary has argued convincingly from his own experience as a novelist and from his knowledge of other novelists that even big novels, constructed deliberately and with much sweat, begin with an insight that seems God-given--totally beyond the novelist's control--even though this insight or experience itself is often commonplace. Henry James's The Spoils of Poynton was inspired by a commonplace remark of a society lady. She said something about a beautiful house going to the dogs because its owners had left. "And what else is new?" we say. Well, we say that because we have not been favored by the Muse. James was, and he built an entire novel around that fleeting but real gift. So a novel was constructed; it was manmade and fallible; its kernel, however, dropped out of Heaven. (See Art and Reality, p. 111-112).

New Year Day may be (by now) an over-built, meretricious human work. But the original idea was inspired. Hence we are still inclined to worship it.

Happy New Year!

*J. J.*