

November 15, 1987 (vol. 3, no. 6)

Dear Colleague:

I've never much appreciated the idea of a round trip, especially if it is taken for pleasure. It reminds me of the pointlessness of life. The idea that life itself is a round trip doesn't grab me either. I can't get too excited about beginning as a "mewling and puking" infant and ending penultimately in drivelling second childhood. The descent into second childishness can be wrapt in the fancy cloth of ritual, as the Japanese do, but that doesn't appeal either: the ritual is itself childishness. A few good things are ruled out for me--the round trip to the Caribbean, for instance, and I can't abide jogging because it obviously takes me right back to where I started. True, it has a goal--health, but if health is something merely to be maintained--a hygienic measure like brushing my teeth--then the practice may be necessary, but it doesn't make me sing.

The ultimate fantasy round trip is advertized by a company in New Jersey. During the holiday seasons of Halloween and Christmas, you can get into a supersonic Concorde of the the British Airways, which will fly up to 60,000 feet over the Atlantic, reach a speed of 1,340 mph, and then return you to Kennedy International Airport. While in the air, you will be served champagne and a meal. "It's a flight to nowhere, with the full Concorde treatment," said Frank Robinson, a spokesman for the company (NYT, Oct. 25, '87).

I wish we can still see life as a Quest. Quest suggests a well-defined goal, but it isn't that--at least, not if we know what quest means in Arthurian Romance. When an Arthurian knight leaves the court, he is not looking for any specific adventure. "He is open to any unexpected adventure that might present itself to him as he fulfills his quest. As a matter of fact, only the knight whose activity is not inhibited by any specific hope or expectation can successfully complete the quest." (Rosalie Vermette, "Terrae Incantatae: The Symbolic Landscape of 12th Century Arthurian Romance," in Geography and Literature, 1987). Adventures cannot be predicted: they are privileged moments. It is a sad life that has let too many of these moments slip by, either because we have never dared to leave the court or because our eyes are transfixed by illusory goals.

Best wishes,

*J. Z.*