

# Detroit—Spring & Summer

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## I.

Imagine this scene: a bright cloudless warm May Sunday in Detroit. On days like this, rare as the purple wallaby, half the local population has suddenly taken cover indoors in a shroud of bubbling beercans, listening to Tiger announcer, Ernie Harwell, broadcasting his play-by-play commentary from New York.

The other half of us, struck by longings to be near the earth on one of God's lavish days, have gone outside, but to what? Lost like moles, blind as bats, the earth for us seems difficult to find. It's there, right there, yet somehow it's lost. On days like this, for it is Spring in Detroit, the blind man pays a groping homage to the sky and the earth...by washing his car, or -by raking the aluminum and cellophane debris in his alley into a large pile. The earth is lost.

It's the style of moles; the way Detroit "goes for a ride" on beautiful Spring days, ends up in a colossal traffic jam staring at the gasoline stations that visibly corrupt the treeless thoroughfares, to end up at home tired and asphyxiated, still resolute and going out to buy hamburger meat and hot dogs, trying like hell to worship earth and Spring by gorging on "Ball Park Franks" stuffed into "Wonder Buns," lots of catsup and mustard—it is too ghastly to continue—but moles have no eyes, no vision; they can live in the earth, they can burrow, they can multiply and work, and they can eat nearly anything. But there is no vision, no sight of the earth, and no "sweetness and light" as Matthew Arnold says.

Sweetness and light. Such words must sound very strange to a Detroiter's ear. The utterance itself suggests a kind of genteel perversity, conjures up the affected speech of platinum-blond homosexuals, or the mumbling hosannas of health-food freaks in dingy stores on Woodward avenue, hanging onto their carcasses with packages of beans and grain. A criminal thought, I suppose, but that's what "sweetness and light" has come to mean to us, translated into the gray suspicious industrial language of our Life.

## II

For the revolutionary, sweetness and light must seem irrelevant and subversive, for it "avoids the issue," the issue of Politics, and the capture of Power by the workers. In an era seized by political behavior, sweetness and light (along with Spring and Summer) seems to become just so much hogwash.

In an age where the armies of man are formed by the fierce polarization of political platitudes, Spring and Summer begin to lose all meaning for the human individual, and become instead part of a political language involving new strategies: The Spring Mobilization, The Summer Rebellion, etc. etc. Summer has now become the promise of a violent mass movement. Summer is now "the long hot summer."

In such a scene, especially in Detroit where giant industries stifle all evidence of seasonal and sensual re-birth, where we accustom ourselves to a new concept of Spring that hinges on the re-opening of Dairy Queens and over-

crowded public beaches, it seems quite impossible to penetrate, except in the most abstract manner, the sweetness and light implied in a humane perception of Nature's rebirth.

### **III**

Spring and Summer, sweetness and light: a world made of leather, and stone and wood, instead of plastic, glass, and aluminum. Sweetness and light is a world of wilderness, full of loose ends, disorders, wild animals, weeds, disease, pain, and the human synthesis of all manner of adversity: Dignity. Spring and Summer, sweetness and light. Dignity.

### **IV**

To be without a sense of Spring and its slosh and hard buds gradually blossoming into Summer is, finally, to be without a sense of rebirth, is to sap oneself gradually of the sense of hope and change that is conferred by the cycle of Nature. To be without Spring, to become so civilized and industrialized and mechanized as to do away with it, to muffle it; all this invites a disaster, for when the sense of rebirth is lost, and the sense of hope, and we become safe and soft and steady, those qualities we most admire in human beings, such as loyalty and generosity, fail to survive, and we die.

Spring reminds us that we die, and that we are reborn each moment, each day, each season, and summer confers to each of us the warmth and calm for deeply contemplating this truth.

### **V**

Sweetness and Light, the realization that every revolutionary opinion, as Orwell said, draws part of its strength from a secret conviction that nothing can be changed. Sweetness and Light; lying in a chaise-lounge, smoking dope or drinking beer, knowing that in order to live in comparative comfort a million slaves must live on the verge of starvation.

Sweetness and Light; to suffer, to see the human condition as a vast and literal suffering where we (the comfortable) half-heartedly make every effort to raise the qualitative level of this suffering: to help everyone suffer on a higher and more noble plane, to worry about God instead of starvation. Relativity. The relativity of all suffering and joy. Sweetness and Light. It is Spring, and the Summer will follow.

### **VI**

To homogenize Spring and Summer and Winter and Fall, to pollute them and industrialize them, to make of them all a steady season of dreary work, and politics; that is the beginning of the End. To lose our foot in the earth, and to put it in a machine (even a McLuhan machine) is to frustrate our need for effort and creation. The final end of this process is to reduce the human being to a brain in a bottle full of electro-chemicals, the final triumph of Progress.

Our attitude toward Spring and Summer should be the opposite of our attitude toward the Machine. The Machine, The Brain, The Cancer, The Drug: they are all a dangerous habit-forming grip of a Madness, a Madness of Capitalism and Communism and mechanization and electronics, a Madness that reduces us all to creatures of ant-hills and bee-hives and zoos and zeros.

## VII

No one is advocating a “return to nature,” for we all live inside the Machine, and all of our perceptions are tied to this infernal Machine, yet it does seem feasible to live life more simply and with greater difficulty, instead of succumbing to the Machinery that would have us live a softer and more complex existence. Even our sense of revolution is corrupted by the Soft Machine, for even it suggests too often that there is no life at all between the paleolithic cave and the monstrous architectures of iron, plastic, and glass.

In finding Spring and Summer, the revolutionary discovers a dimension of religion; submerges himself in the water of the life that brought him to the shore, and which will carry him out again on the high tide.

Keeping one foot in the earth alters and refines our revolutionary rhetoric, subdues and refreshes our mania for logic and progress and more death. With one foot in the earth of Spring, with one arm in the dark movements of Summer, one may anticipate the gradual lucidity of healing metaphysical speculations, as Henry Miller put it, speculations which enthrall the world: in going the whole hog and taking your punishment. We cannot explain what is unique, and that is part of the vast mystery of Spring and Summer, Sweetness and Light.

To keep an empty mind is the greatest feat of all; to be silent, to dig with your hands in the earth, to avoid the newspapers and television, to avoid all gossip, to be profoundly lazy. In short, to be for a time totally indifferent to the fate of the political world is the finest medicine a man can give himself. *Dolce far niente*. Sweetness and Light.

## VIII

A tree is the visible face of Life. As Miller put it, trees bring water, cattle, shade, leisure, songs, poets, painters, legislators, and visionaries. The list must include the revolutionary. In the words of the haiku: I said to the almond tree, “Sister, speak to me of God,” and the almond tree blossomed.

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