Dedication Day

Rough Sketch for a Moving Picture

by James Agee

ON an afternoon in the early spring of 1946, in the noble space between the Washington Obelisk and the Lincoln Memorial, crowds, roped off from a great square, watched the statesmen, diplomats, military officials, scientists, clergymen, college presidents, newsreel cameramen and *Life* photographers who had assembled upon special platforms, under the unsteady sunlight, and under the uneasy motions of the flags of nearly all nations, to dedicate the heroic new Arch which was for all time to come to memorialize the greatest of human achievements.

The Arch, which had been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, was the master-builder's sole concession to the Romanesque; at that, he had made it proof against frost, earthquakes, and the inscription and carving of initials. Glistering more subtly than most jewels—for it was made not of stone but of fused uranium—it stood behind the billowing, rainbow-shaded veil which as yet concealed its dedicatory legend, like some giant captive royal slave of antiquity, face masked, the body nude.

From loudspeakers fairly successfully concealed within the Arch, or sprouting tall above the wide, renewing lawns like rigid quartets of zinc morning-glories, poured a special performance of the choral movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, in a new translation by Louis Aragon and Harry Brown, done under the supervision of Robert E. Sherwood, conducted by Arturo Toscanini in Studio 8-H in Rockefeller Centre, where an invited audience watched the dedication ceremony on the screen of television's first major hookup.

Even by still not wholly perfected television, it was a stirring sight. The many preliminary speeches, to be sure, had been rather more protracted and less satisfying than speeches on great occasions generally are; for it was not clear either to the speakers or to the listeners precisely why or to what purpose or idea the Arch had been raised, and was to be dedicated: they labored, rather, purely under an irresistible obligation both to indicate their recognition of a great event by erecting a permanent altar to it, and to sign their names to the moment in a few authorized words—as is still found necessary by many people, for instance, when a dead man is buried. The speeches, accordingly, were more notable for resonance, eloquence, and on every speaker's part a most scrupulous courtesy and optimism, than for understanding, far less communication of understanding. But once the speeches were over, the ceremony was a peculiarly simple one and achieved, as several Europeans and many of the more sophisticated natives were afterward to agree in semi-privacy, a level of good taste hardly to be expected of ordinary Americans.

All it amounted to, in the long run, was a moment of silence, during which only the restive flags and the sighing of the great veil especially distracted the eye. It involved, on the part of Maestro Toscanini (who was playing as even he had never played before), a Grand Pause, just before that majestic instant in Beethoven's symphony in which the basses, endorsed by trombones and emulated by soprani, intone the lines

I embrace ye, O ye Millions!
Here's a kiss for all the World!

—lines upon which, after earnest discussion whether to substitute for the somewhat fulsome and perhaps over-Teutonic word *kiss* the sturdily alliterative, more Whitmanesque and manly, more comradely, altogether healthier word *wink*, the retranslators had agreed that it was impossible to improve. During this pause, also, it was possible to hear the subdued rattle of Latin as four ravenous Cardinals raced towards the Consecration in all but perfect unison, their voices blended with that of the Pontifical Benediction, relayed from Rome; a group of eminent Protestant clergymen, each, between his closed eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger as if adjusting an invisible pair of pince-nez, knelt each on one knee at the spread center of a new lawn handkerchief; the most prominent and progressive of American Reformist Rabbis all but inaudibly intoned *Eli, Eli,* intimately, into a neat small microphone; the twenty best Allied marksmen of the Second World War presented their rifles; and many members of many national bands lipped their reeds and mouthpieces or, heads bowed to deft fingertips, tested their drumheads and ravanastrons.

The climax was simple indeed. Dressed in white organdie, an exquisite little girl, recently judged the healthiest three-year-old in the United States (for it had been quickly and courteously agreed, shortly after the termination of lend-lease and Mr. Herbert Lehman's three hundred and seventy-first appeal to Congress in regard to U. N. R. R. A.'s more urgent needs, that no other nation should enter competitors), upon receiving a soft shove from her mother, a former screen star, and a whispered "Now, Lidice", toddled alone into the open, along the sulphur-pale grass, towards the great Arch, bearing in her right hand a taper which had been lighted from a light which had been taken from the light which burns eternally in Paris, above the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. At the same moment, from a small hole at dead center of the pavement beneath the Arch, (an orifice bound by a platinum facsimile of Martha Washington's wedding ring), and from the center, as well, of an embossed lucite medallion which, within a zodiacal wreath, indicated the direction of, and the air mileage to, the capital city of every civilized nation, shyly, rather the way the early worm might try the air in an especially lyrical Disney cartoon, stood up a few inches of gleaming white cord. As the child approached, her bladder a trifle unstabilized by privilege, the Cardinals, and the Monsignori and Papal Knights who served as their acolytes, could not perfectly restrain the sideward sliding of their eyes; among

the Protestant clergymen there were several who saw what happened through the rainbow swarming of their eyelashes; the Rabbi's vocal chords thickened, necessitating a slight clearing of the throat, during which he forgot to turn from his microphone; a few even of the superbly disciplined riflemen (and women) uncrossed their eyes from the muzzles of their weapons; one of the musicians permitted his instrument, a tuba, to emit a strangled expletive; a boy on the outskirts of the great crowd could be heard hawking Good Humors, which were not moving very satisfactorily, for the day was chilly; a woman, moaning, fainted, falling double over the rope; and an Eagle Scout, masterfully brocaded with Merit Badges fiercely repeating to himself his terrifying last-minute change of instructions (for it had been decided only in afterthought, in bitter and desperate haste), "*No! No! Not* Taps! *Not* Taps!", raised his bugle to his beardless, though freshly, and electrically, shaven lips.

And now the child stooped, in one of the more rudimentary postures of ballet, and, extending her sanctified taper, touched the bright cord with the flame; and in the exquisite silence there began, audible even to the distant boy who stopped saying Good Humor in the middle of the first syllable, a faint, searching, rustling noise, not unlike that which a snake elicits as he retires among dead leaves. And now, while the musicians poised their instruments and the marksmen slanted their rifles upward; and while the Cardinals slowed or accelerated a little as need be, in order to reach their genuflections, and the threshing of the bells, at the precisely proper moment; and while, in New York, the Maestro held one hundred and seventeen instruments and nine hundred and forty-three pairs of eyes suspended as by one spider-thread from the tip of his baton; and while the woman who had fainted was softly and quickly shunted towards the rear of the crowd; and while the voice of America's Number One Commentator continued its description, in such expert unobtrusiveness that although he was thrillingly audible to every one among the millions in his unseen audience, not a single person among the onlookers could hear a word he said, though nearly all were straining with all their strength, in order that they might know what was happening before they read it in the late editions, which were even now being purchased along the periphery of the crowd; while all these things were transpiring, or held themselves balanced intense in readiness, trembling, the chosen Scout, who in innumerable rehearsals had perfected a rendition of Taps so heartrending that, in recorded form, with hummed accompaniment by Bing Crosby, the Andrews Sisters, the Ink Spots, and the Westminster Choir, it had already sold better than a million disks, did as best he could, disconsolately, lacking rehearsals, with Reveille, which he had had no occasion to play since Camp broke up the previous summer, and which many people agreed he managed really very prettily, considering the circumstances. As his last note melted, the twenty marksmen fired the first of their twenty-one salutes, flicking the silver-gilt padlocks from a long rank of cages which exhaled a brilliant flock of homing doves, somewhat frustrated in their breathing by wired-on, imitation olive-branches, and banded with appropriate messages with which, after wheeling briefly, luminous against the clouds, they set off in haste for the several and all-inclusive quarters of the globe; the Cardinals genuflected; their bells threshed; the Rabbi collapsed his microphone stand and smoothed his hair; the woman who had fainted opened her eyes, gazed up the sharp chins of sympathizers and, with a heartsick groan, miscarried; the clergymen rose from their knees and carefully folded and pocketed their handkerchiefs; the Good Humor salesboy resumed business; and in perfect synchronization the military bands of forty-six nations and the National Broadcasting Symphony Orchestra and the Westminster Choir attacked respectively their respective national anthems and their continuation of the Choral Symphony, all somewhat modified, in the interests of euphony, by Morton Gould, but virtually all still recognizable to the untrained ear; and the iridescent veil, its release cords pulled, on a signal from James Bryant Conant, by the President of the United States, Charles De Gaulle, a reluctant veteran of the Chinese Purchasing Commission, and undersecretaries from the Embassies of the other two of the Big Five, sank laboring on the March air from the crest of the Arch, revealing, in Basic English, the words:

THIS IS IT

A soft cheer of awe moved upon the crowd; then a flowering of applause like the rumination of leaves before rain: for this secret had been successfully kept, and very few of those on the outskirts had managed to buy extras until the veil fell.

Below the legend, the Eternal Fuse continued to extrude and to consume itself, one inch above the pavement, at the rate of one inch per second. The fuse was chemically calculated continuously somewhat to intensify the noise of its consumption, enough to be distinguishable to anyone who kept attentive vigil for so much as twenty-four hours; at the end of precisely one hundred years, it was further calculated, this penetrating whisper, grown continuously more acute but never dynamically more loud, would become audible at the point most distant from its origin, on the planet. Some stayed, now, and held vigil; others, many, listened a half hour, even an hour, then lost patience; slowly, towards the early neons, the crowd dissolved. Few were left, at dusk, to witness the lowering and folding of the flags.

DURING the earlier stages of planning the Memorial there had been considerable discussion whether the fuse should burn down at the rate of an inch per hour, or even per day; but an inch per second had ultimately been agreed on not only as peppier and somehow more in keeping, but also because this rate of consumption measurably helped solve, or at least proved awareness of, certain delicate social and economic problems. Some 7,200 feet of the fuse would be consumed each day; approximately 4,897.6 miles, which amounted to roughly 322.17 bales of cotton, each year. The cotton would be the finest Egyptian long-staple, grown by members of a Sharecropper Rehabilitation Project in one of the richest of the condemned areas of the Delta. Bales would be furnished, alternately, by a white and a Negro family, and would be purchased at cost, the cash to be applied against the interest on Rehabilitation Loans. The purchase of the chemicals used in impregnating the fuse, a mere few tons of those substances so recently and abruptly rendered obsolete for military use, was to be sure a mere

token, but as such it assured various embarrassed manufacturers of archaic munitions of the Government's enduring sympathy, and concern for their welfare. Moreover, the manufacture of the fuse itself made gainful and honorable employment available to a number of persons otherwise unemployable, and added no little not only to the symbolic dignity but also to the human warmth of the entire Project. For beneath the Arch, in a small, air-conditioned, irradiated workshop so ingeniously contrived by Norman Bel Geddes that it was possible for those who found it more efficient to do their share from hospital beds or even, a few of them, from streamlined baskets, the fuse was manufactured on the spot. Its creators, who were by unanimous agreement among those in charge of the Memorial called Keepers of the Flame, worked perpetually, wheeled in and out, as shifts changed, through silent tunnels of tile and plastic, by women physicians who had been rendered redundant by the termination of hostilities. They were at all times visible, even while they slept, to tourists who used other tunnels, through thick walls of polarized glass. The tourists' admission fees, even though ex-servicemen and children in arms were to be passed at half price for the next two years, would clearly better than pay both the initial cost and the maintenance of the Project; the surplus monies were to be applied towards the relief of those who should have neglected to redeem their War and Victory Bonds by 1950.

One of these twelve-hour shifts (for the work was light) was composed of such disabled winners of the Distinguished Service Cross, the Congressional Medal of Honor, and the Navy Cross, as did not wish to be a burden on their communities or to languish in Veterans' Hospitals, and as were alert to the immense therapeutic value of honest work. It was required of them only that they wear their uniforms and decorations, during working hours, and, as a reminder and incentive to youth, show their wounds, scars, or stumps. They were paid whatever their rank and injury entitled them, in pension. The other shift was composed of depreciated but surviving collaborators in the experiments at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, who had been forgiven, and were, indeed, aside from a few unfortunate incidents which marred the course of their journey across the less progressive reaches of the nation, treated with marked civility, even being permitted to shake hands with the Secretaries of State and of War, who laughingly apologized, through an interpreter, for wearing radiation-proof gloves and masks throughout the little ceremony. There had at first been some talk of accepting, for this work, only such Japanese as embraced Christianity, but it was generously decided, in the interests of religious toleration, that this should not be required; indeed, a number of the Nagasaki colleagues, formerly Christian, were known to have renounced Christianity; it was an open secret, even, that two of them were privately practising the outlawed Shintoism. This too (though care was taken that the fact should not become known among the general public) was smilingly disregarded, on the grounds that in their present occupation, and distance from the homeland, and fewness in number—not to mention the efficiency of the magnificently trained Project Guardians—no great harm was likely to come of these atavist diehards. It was required of the Japanese only that they keep on display, during working hours, those strange burns which have excited, in Americans, so much friendly curiosity—an exposure necessarily limited, of course, in a number of cases, in the interests of decency. These Japanese were paid the wages customary for prisoners of war (the funds were deposited in their names in a Subtreasury vault, their board and keep being deductible) and, in accordance with the rulings of the Geneva Convention, were required, in their eating, to fare neither better, nor worse, nor other, than men in our own armed services, being forced, in fact, to ingest one can of K Rations, two 4-pound porterhouse steaks, one carton of Camels, eight squares of Ex-Lax, two boxes of Puffed Rice, the juice of twelve oranges, a tin of Spam, a cup of Ovaltine, a prophylactic, a tube of nationally advertised toothpaste, and macerated or liquefied overseas editions of *Time*, *Readers' Digest* and the New Testament, each, per day, plus roast beef, apple pie and store cheese on Sundays and proper supplements, including third helpings, spoonlickings and ejaculations of "Gosh, Mom", of the special dishes traditionally appropriate to the major Holidays; all to be administered orally, rectally, or by intravenous injection, as best befitted the comfort of the individual patient—a task which many of the little fellows found so embarrassing, and which the tourists found so richly amusing to watch, that even after the first few days, feeding time created something of a traffic problem.

It was agreed that in due course these invalids would be supplanted at their jobs by their children if they should prove capable of breeding and bearing them, and that such children, if their behavior should prove unexceptionable up to the age of 21 years, would be granted the privileges of American citizenship and of absentee voting. The male children of those veterans capable of siring them would be offered their choice between the same lifetime guarantee of gainful employment, and a scholarship at Peddie. In the event—as to some people seemed quite conceivable—that this turnover plan too rapidly diminished the personnel, it had already been arranged that the Japanese and American ranks be filled out respectively by Mission converts to any one of the accredited Christian faiths, and by divinity students, who would receive fullcourse seminarial credits for their services per year, tuition halved.

Raw materials were conveyed to these workers each midnight, promptly, by armored truck. Before the day of the ceremony they had produced a spool of fuse so thick that it was decided to give them a holiday. In the morning, on the White House Back Lawn, there was a picnic, with a sack race, and a baseball game (won, amusingly enough, by the Japanese). In the afternoon they were all brought to reserved areas (segregating, however, the Japanese and Americans) at the very brink of the ropes, to witness the Dedication.

ONE pathetic incident marred this otherwise perfect day. One of the more elderly of those scientists who contributed their genius towards the perfecting of the bomb—he shall, in these columns at least, remain nameless—had begun, not long after the Japanese surrender, to strike his colleagues as a little queer in the head. He was known to have attended Mass, at first secretly, then quite openly; later, to have spent several evenings of silence among the Friends; later, to have sought out a poet of his acquaintance, of

whom, it has been learned, he asked Mahatma Gandhi's postal address, whether a letter might be kindly received, and answered, and approximately how far into the East it might be advisable to journey, insofar as possible on foot, or on his knees ("perhaps to Lhasa?" he asked), in what he called "atonement". The poet, according to his own account of this singular interview, merely laughed uproariously, murmuring some obscurantist figure of speech—which with great amusement he repeated, when questioned by friends of the scientist—about "locking the stable after the horse had been stolen". It was not long after this—early in October—that plans for the Arch began to develop. Once the scientist learned of the idea of the underground personnel he did not rest, or indeed let any of his associates or of their contacts among the officials rest, until he had gained permission to become one of the Keepers. This was granted him the more reluctantly because he insisted on working with the Japanese shift and, to the further embarrassment of everyone, gave warning that he would refuse to eat the carefully balanced diet offered the Japanese, preferring, rather, just so much boiled unpolished rice per day as he could hold in the palm of one hand. In view of his immense services to humanity, and out of a kind of pity, and a perhaps overconscientious sense that the community as a whole, having so greatly benefited through him, shared, in some measure no matter how small or indirect, a certain responsibility, or at least concern, for his broken mind, it was, after prolonged consultation with eminent psychologists, agreed that he should be humored. Unfortunately, the best will in the world, on the part of those officially and medically responsible, was not, as it turned out, enough.

In the course of those "Arch Prevues", so-called, which many readers will have glimpsed in the newsreels, it became painfully clear that it was entirely unfeasible to permit him to persist in his wish. It was not that the Japanese misbehaved; indeed, they left the old man severely alone. It was, rather, the behavior of the physicist himself, and the disturbing effect of his behavior upon Prevue tourists. Although the thick glass rendered him inaudible, it was only too clear, to the more observant of these onlookers, that as he worked he spoke, and that his speech was evidently a terrible blended stream of self-vilification and of pr-y-r. And even to those insufficiently accustomed to these retrogressive attitudes to decipher them correctly (for many thought, as they put it, that he was "just cussing out the Japs"), it was nevertheless excruciatingly embarrassing to see a white man working among those of a different pigmentation, and to see how, so often as the limited gestures necessary to his work permitted him, he tore at his thin hair and beat his bruised face with clenched fists and tore at it with his nails, and to see how at all times his bitten lips bled copiously onto his starched laboratory jacket, immediately soiling it, regardless of its ever more frequent change; and how his torn face was wet with continuous, uncontrolled (and perhaps uncontrollable) tears. Some took to rapping on the glass with coins to draw his attention, then, according to their wont, either jeering at him by gestures of their hands and by contortions of their faces, or attempting to revive his courage and self-esteem by showing in their faces, or by making the sign of Victory and smiling their sympathy, or by clasping and shaking their hands and grinning, that however regrettable his present plight they continued to honor and to befriend and to congratulate him, in view of his past achievements. Such gestures, however, appeared to offend the Japanese, and were discouraged by the Guards. Others of the spectators passed on quickly in revulsion; and that too, in its own way, impaired the intended dignity, charm and decorum of the exhibit. Still others, however, and in considerable numbers, blocked the tourists' tunnel by following the example of one young soldier who, late in the afternoon before the Dedication, quite without warning fell to his knees and burst into tears. To be sure, few of his imitators wept; most of them, indeed, and this was especially true of those at the edge of the sudden crowd, did not know what was happening, and knelt only because they saw that those ahead of them were kneeling. Scrupulously conducted interviews immediately following the disturbance, in which prominent churchmen and psychiatrists were assisted by Gallup Poll experts, thoroughly established the fact that the soldier himself, despite his many campaign-stars and decorations for valor, was a psychoneurotic, that virtually nobody had understood the cause of his outburst, and that nothing whatever need be feared, notwithstanding the insistence of certain evangelistic types, in the way of a so-called "religious revival". Even so, the kneeling was of itself an irregular and far from convenient action; the more so because for every tourist who, out of a courteous desire to do what was expected of him, dropped to his knees, there were at least two others (2.29, by the Gallup count) who, mistaking this for some kind of vulgar sentimentality, in natural impatience and contempt, and no little anger, clambered among and through and over the close-packed kneelers, creating a severe jam and, ultimately, a mild panic; for an overwrought woman at the far edge of the commotion screamed that the Japanese had broken loose, others took up the cry, and those in front of the exhibit split and bruised the unbreakable glass in their effort to protect their women-folk. (The Japanese, it must be said, were entirely innocent in this affair.) From this confusion many of all types, kneelers, non-kneelers, defenders and defended alike, emerged with minor contusions, and instituted suits against the Arch Authority for damage to their nerves, clothing, and earning power. Such are the unfortunate effects of a single man's unbridled individualism.

It was at the end of this shift, accordingly, at midnight, that the physicist was told, in all possible kindliness, that his services, greatly as they were appreciated, would no longer be required, and that he had his choice of lifelong residence and treatment, gratis, in whatever sanitarium in the nation he might prefer. Instantly he stopped his crying and asked, in a manner which seemed entirely rational, whether he might not, before retiring, have at least the privilige of throwing that switch, in the underground workshop, which would start the fuse on its eternal journey. He did not like to think, he said, that any one of his fellow-workers would be deprived of his day off, or of witnessing the climactic moment from the best point of vantage possible. Such was the unworldliness of the man, that it had not occurred to him that this was, after all, a crucial part of the ceremony; in fact, a switch had been arranged on the Number One Platform (its knob set with the Hope Diamond, on loan, and heavily insured for the occasion); and it was to be thrown—since both Drs. Albert Einstein

and Lise Meitner had declined the honor—by Major General Leslie Groves. It was decided not to embarrass the poor old man. Quickly, by telephone, the General's magnanimous withdrawal was secured; the scientist was then told that everyone would be delighted, and honored, if he would consent to "start the ball rolling", as they said, in a position of the greatest possible conspicuousness and eminence. Courteously, even gratefully, he replied that he really preferred to be underground. After careful consultation, it was deemed entirely harmless to grant his wish—a decision which, as nobody could have foreseen, was to prove tragically ill-advised.

Within a few minutes after the Dedication, he was found next the great spool, dead by his own hand (by prussic acid); it was deduced that he must have swallowed the poison in the instant of throwing the switch. Pinned to his immaculate laboratory jacket was a note, written clearly and steadily in his own hand.

Out of deference to the deceased and to his surviving relatives, it was instantly and unanimously agreed not to publish this short, singular document (though qualified students will be granted access to it), whose contents could only puzzle and offend sane human beings, and establish beyond possible question the piteous derangement of a man of former genius. By rough paraphrase, however, it seems not dishonorable to say that in unimpeachable sincerity he regarded his suicide as obligatory—as, indeed, a kind of religious or ethical "sacrifice", through which he hoped to endow the triumphal monument with a new and special significance and, through the gradual spread and understanding of that significance, once more (as he thought) to assist the human race.

Even in death, however, this unfortunate but brilliant man again made history. Psychoanalysts are even now busy exploring the hidden depths of the already celebrated case; the nation's leading philosophers are rushing a symposium to be entitled *The New New Failure of Nerve;* and clergymen of all denominations, united in agreement perhaps more firmly than ever before, are determined to preach next Sunday (and, if need be, on the following Sunday as well), using this tragic incident by no means unsympathetically yet sternly, and with controlled ridicule, as an object-lesson, and grave admonition, to such in their spiritual charge as find themselves for any reason of pride, or a thirst for undue publicity, liable to the grievous error of exaggerated scrupulousness. "Some things are best left to Jesus Christ", will be the burden of their argument; the text will be, *Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.*

The body will be interred, with military honors, at the centre of that area in New Mexico in which this gifted scientist, and his colleagues, first saw the light of the New Age. And it does not seem too much to hope that perhaps he will be remembered, not, surely, as he had intended, yet a little wistfully, in the sound of The Fuse itself as it increases upon the world. For misguided and altogether regrettable though his last days were—a sad warning indeed to those who turn aside from the dictates of reason, and accept human progress reluctantly—he was, nevertheless, perhaps, our last link with a not-too-distant past in which such conceptions as those of "atonement", and "guilt", and "individual responsibility", still had significance. And, in a sense, his gift to mankind was greater, perhaps, than that of his more stable colleagues. For, though "sacrifice" is a word to be used only with apologies, it would be hard to define what, if anything, they "sacrificed" in the giving; but he gave up his sanity.