

THE DECLINE OF BOOK REVIEWING

ELIZABETH HARDWICK

*The fates of authors and publishers—
—not to mention the reading public—
depend on book reviews—but who reviews
the reviewers? Miss Hardwick undertakes
one of the few thorough critiques of the
leading popular reviews to appear in
recent years and explains why “a Sunday
morning with the book reviews is often a
dismal experience.” A distinguished novelist
and book reviewer herself, Miss Hardwick is
the wife of the poet Robert Lowell.*

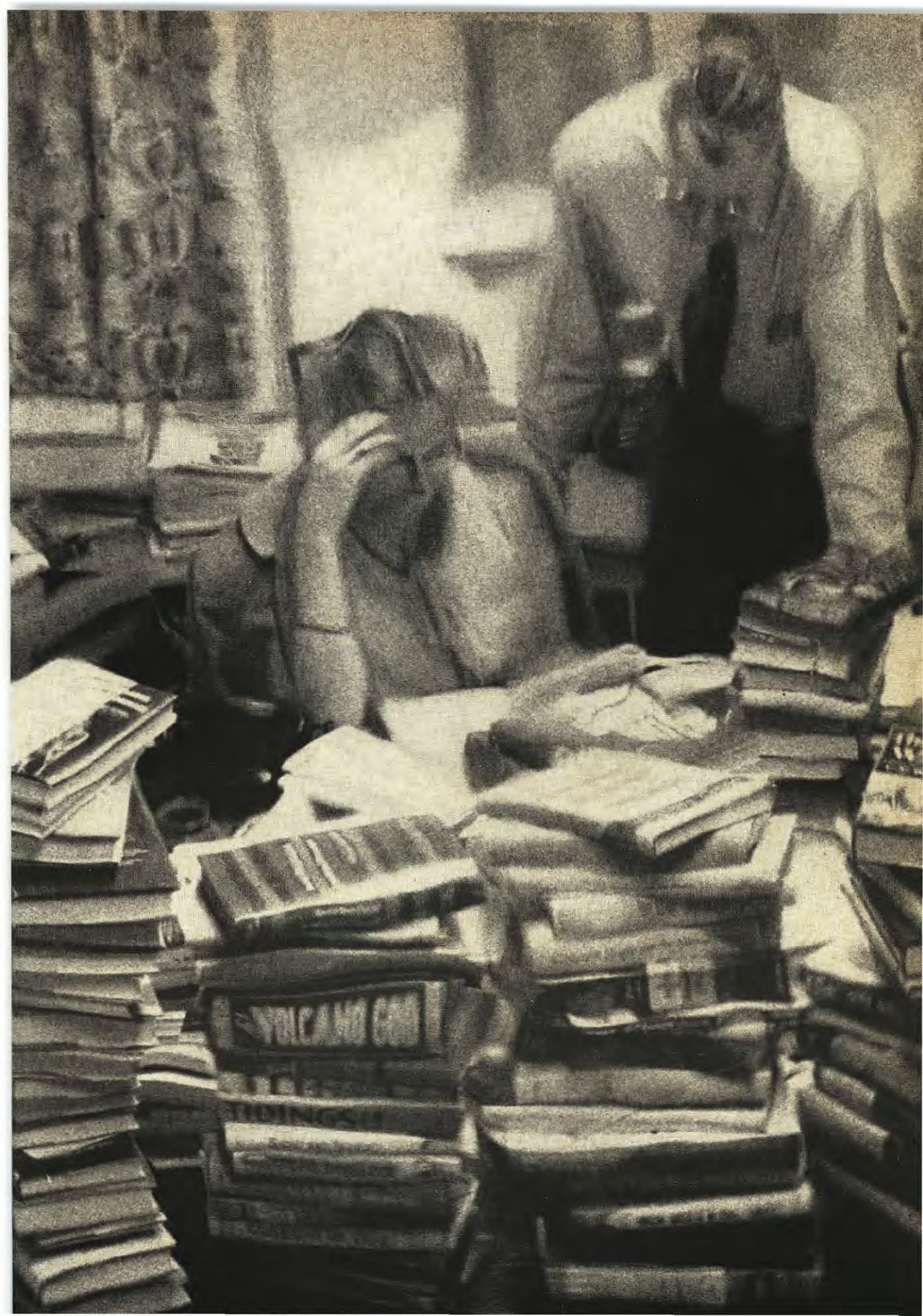
There used to be the notion that Keats was killed by a bad review, that in despair and hopelessness he turned his back to the wall and gave up the struggle against tuberculosis. Later evidence has shown that Keats took his hostile reviews with a considerably more manly calm than we were taught in school, and yet the image of the young, rare talent cut down by venomous reviewers remains firmly fixed in the public mind.

The reviewer and critic are still thought of as persons of dangerous acerbity, fickle demons, cruel to youth and blind to new work, bent upon turning the literate public away from freshness and importance out of jealousy, mean conservatism, or whatever. Poor Keats were he living today might suffer a literary death, but it would not be from attack; instead he might choke on what Emerson called a “mush of concession.” In America, now, oblivion, literary failure, obscurity, neglect—all the great moments of artistic tragedy and misunderstanding—still occur, but the natural conditions for the occurrence are in a curious state of camouflage, like those decorating ideas in which wood is painted to look like paper and paper to look like wood. A genius may indeed go to his grave unread, but he will hardly have gone to it unpraised. Sweet, bland commendations fall everywhere upon the scene; a universal, if somewhat lobotomized, accommodation reigns. A book is born into a puddle of treacle; the brine of hostile criticism is only a memory. Everyone is found to have “filled a need,” and is to be “thanked” for some-

thing and to be excused for “minor faults in an otherwise excellent work.” “A thoroughly mature artist” appears many times a week and often daily; many are the bringers of those “messages the Free World will ignore at its peril.”

The condition of popular reviewing has become so listless, the effect of its agreeable judgments so enervating to the general reading public that the sly publishers of *Lolita* have tried to stimulate sales by quoting *bad* reviews along with, to be sure, the usual, repetitive good ones. (Orville Prescott: “*Lolita* is undeniably news in the world of books. Unfortunately it is bad news.” And Gilbert Highet: “I am sorry that *Lolita* was ever published. I am sorry it was ever written.”)

It is not merely the praise of everything in sight—a special problem in itself—that vexes and confounds those who look closely at the literary scene, but there is also the unaccountable sluggishness of the *New York Times* and *Herald Tribune* Sunday book-review sections. The value and importance of individual books are dizzily inflated, in keeping with the American mood at the moment, but the book-review sections as a cultural enterprise are, like a pocket of unemployment, in a state of baneful depression insofar as liveliness and interest are concerned. One had not thought they could go downward, since they have always been modest,



rather conventional journals. Still, there had been room for a decline in the last few years and the opportunity has been taken. A Sunday morning with the book reviews is often a dismal experience. It is best to be in a state of distracted tolerance when one takes up, particularly, the *Herald Tribune Book Review*. This publication is not just somewhat mediocre; it has also a strange, perplexing inadequacy as it dimly comes forth week after week.

For the world of books, for readers and writers, the torpor of the *New York Times Book Review* is more affecting. There come to mind all those high-school English teachers, those faithful librarians and booksellers, those trusting suburbanites, those bright young men and women in the provinces, all those who believe in the judgment of the *Times* and who need its direction. The worst result of its decline is that it acts as a sort of hidden dissuader, gently, blandly, respectfully denying whatever vivacious interest there might be in books or in literary matters generally. The flat praise and the faint dissension, the minimal style and the light little article, the absence of involvement, passion, character, eccentricity—the lack, at last, of the literary tone itself—have made the *New York Times* into a provincial literary journal, longer and thicker, but not much different in the end from all those small-town Sunday “Book Pages.” (The *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, the *Atlantic*, the news and opinion weeklies, the literary magazines all devote a good deal of space and thought to the reviewing of books. The often awkward and the always variable results should not go unremarked. However, in these magazines the reviews are only a part of the claim upon the reader's attention, and the peculiar disappointments of the manner in which books are sometimes treated cannot be understood without a close study of each magazine as a whole.)

“COVERAGE” THAT KILLS

It is with dismay that one decides the malaise of the popular reviewing publications—the *Times* and *Tribune* and the *Saturday Review*—is not always to be laid at the door of commerce. It had been simple and reassuring to believe the pressure of book publishers and booksellers accounted for the hospitable reception of trashy novels, commonplace “think” books, and so on. The publishers needed favorable reviews to use for the display of their product, as an Easter basket needs shredded green paper under the eggs. No one thought the pressure was simple

and direct; it was imagined to be subtle, practical, basic, that is, having to do with the fact that the advertisements of the publishing business keep the book-review sections going financially. This explanation has, naturally, had an exaggerated acceptance.

The truth is, one imagines, that the publishers—seeing their best and their least products received with a uniform equanimity—must be aware that the drama of the book world is being slowly, painlessly killed. Everything is somehow alike, whether it be a routine work of history by a respectable academic, a group of platitudes from the Pentagon, a volume of verse, a work of radical ideas, a work of conservative ideas. Simple “coverage” seems to have won out over the drama of opinion; “readability,” a cozy little word, has taken the place of the old-fashioned requirement of a good, clear prose style, which is something else. All differences of excellence, of position, of form are blurred by the slumberous acceptance. The blur erases good and bad alike, the conventional and the odd, so that it finally appears that the author like the reviewer really does not have a position. The reviewer's grace falls upon the rich and the poor alike; a work which is going to be a best seller, in which the publishers have sunk their fortune, is commended only at greater length than the book from which the publishers hardly expect to break even. In this fashion there is a sort of democratic euphoria that may do the light book a service but will hardly meet the needs of a serious work. When a book is rebuked, the rebuke is usually nothing more than a quick little jab with the needle, administered in the midst of therapeutic compliments. “—— ——— is sometimes self-consciously arch,” said one review. “But it contains enough of —— ——'s famous wit and style to make American publication worthwhile. . . .”

The editors of the reviewing publications no longer seem to be engaged in literature. Books pile up, out they go, and in comes the review. Many distinguished minds give their names to various long and short articles in the *Times*, *Tribune*, and *Saturday Review*. The wares offered by the better writers are apt, frequently, to be something less than their best. Having awakened to so many gloomy Sundays, they accept their assignments in a co-operative spirit and return a “readable” piece, nothing much, of course. (Alice James wrote in her diary that her brother, Henry, was asked to write for the popular press and assured he could do anything he pleased “so long as there's nothing literary in it.”)

The retention of certain disgruntled, repetitive commentators is alone enough to dispute notions of crude commercialism on the part of the reviewing publications. A businesslike editor, a "growing" organization—such as we are always reading about in the press—would have assessed the protests, if any, and put these fumbling minds out to pasture. For instance, what could be more tiresome than J. Donald Adams's attacks on poor Lionel Trilling for trying to be interesting on Robert Frost? Only another attack on Adams, perhaps—who is, like the pressure of commerce, hardly the real trouble with the *Times*. Adams is like one of those public monuments only a stranger or someone who has been away for a while takes notice of. What is truly dismaying about the *Times* and *Tribune* is the quality of the editing.

Recently a small magazine called the *Fifties* published an interview with the editor-in-chief of the *New York Times Book Review*, Mr. Francis Brown. Mr. Brown appears in this exchange as a man with considerable editorial experience in general and very little "feel" for the particular work to which he has been appointed, that is editor of the powerfully important weekly *Book Review*. He, sadly, nowhere in the interview shows a vivid interest or even a sophistication about literary matters, the world of books and writers—the very least necessary for his position. His approach is modest, naïve, and curiously spiritless. In college, he tells us in the interview, he majored in history and subsequently became general editor of *Current History*. Later he went to *Time*, where he had "nothing to do with books," and at last he was chosen to "take a crack at the *Book Review*." The interviewer, hinting at some of the defects of the *Book Review*, wondered if there wasn't too much reliance on specialists, a too frequent practice of giving a book to a reviewer who had written a book like it, or about the same country or the same period. Mr. Brown felt that "a field was a field." When asked to compare our *Times Book Review* with the *Times Literary Supplement* in London, Brown opined, "They have a narrow audience and we have a wide one. I think in fiction they are doing the worst of any reputable publication."

This is an astonishing opinion to anyone who has followed the reviews in the London *Times* and the other English reviewing papers, such as the Sunday *Times* and the *Observer*. These papers consistently set a standard intrinsically so much higher than ours that detailed comparison is almost impossible. It is not simply what

may turn up in an individual review; it is profoundly a matter of the tone, the seriousness, the independence of mind and temperament. Richard Blackmur in a recent article tells of a conversation with the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* who felt that the trouble with the American book reviews was just this lack of a strong, independent editorial direction and who ventured that very few publishers would withdraw their advertising because of the disappearance of the bland product being put out at the moment. A description of the *Times Literary Supplement*, the London publication, by Dwight Macdonald finds that the English paper "seems to be edited and read by people who know who they are and what interests them. That the vast majority of their fellow citizens do not share their interest in the development of English prose, the bibliography of Byelorussia, André Gide's treatment of his wife, the precise relation of folksong and plainsong, and 'the large blot' in a letter of Dr. Johnson's which has given much trouble to several of his editors . . . this seems not in any way to trouble them."

REVIEWING AS WRITING

Invariably right opinion is not the only judge of a critic's powers, although a taste that goes wrong frequently is only allowed to the greatest minds! In any case, it all depends upon who is right and who is wrong. The communication of the delight and importance of books, ideas, culture itself, is the very least one would expect from a journal devoted to reviewing of new and old works. Beyond that beginning, the interest of the mind of the individual reviewer is everything. Book reviewing is a form of writing. We don't pick up the Sunday *Times* to find out what Mr. Smith thinks of, for instance, *Dr. Zhivago*. (It would very likely be Mrs. Smith in the *Herald Tribune*.) As the saying goes, What do you have when you find out what Mr. Smith thinks of *Dr. Zhivago*? It *does* matter what an unusual mind, capable of presenting fresh ideas in a vivid and original and interesting manner, thinks of books as they appear. For sheer information, a somewhat expanded publisher's list would do just as well as a good many of the reviews that appear weekly.

In a study of book reviewing done at Wayne University, we find that our old faithful, the eternally "favorable review," holds his own with all the stamina we have learned to expect. Fifty-one per cent of the reviews summarized in *Book Review Digest* in 1956 were favorable. A much

more interesting figure is that 44.3 per cent were *non-committal*! The bare meaning of "review" would strongly incline most people to the production of an opinion of some sort and so the reluctance of the non-committal reviewers to perform is a fact of great perplexity. The unfavorable reviews number 4.7 per cent.

ONE SUNDAY

A Sunday some months ago in the *Herald Tribune*. The following are excerpts from five reviews of current novels, reviews that sadly call to mind a teen-age theme.

(1) "*The real value of the novel lies in its awareness of character, the essential personality, and the subtle effect of time.*"

(2) "*Occasionally some of the workings of the story seem contrived, but this is only a first impression, for foremost of all is the re-creation of an atmosphere which is so strong that it dictates a destiny.*"

(3) "*Miss ——— writes well, telling the story with a matter-of-factness and vividness that help to carry the strangeness of her central theme. For a reader who relishes a touch of the macabre, it is an intriguing exploration of the imagination.*"

(4) "*—————, however, is an interesting and swiftly moving book; more complicated than most of its kind, and with subtler shading to its characters. It makes good reading.*"

(5) "*It is also, within the framework ——— has set for himself, a warm, continuously interesting story of what can happen to a group of ordinary people in a perilous situation, a situation, incidentally, at least as likely as the one Nevil Shute postulates in 'On the Beach.'*"

("The one Nevil Shute postulates in 'On the Beach'" — the assurance of this phrase would give many a reader a pause, reminding us, as it does, that there are all kinds of examples of what is called "obscurity of reference.")

About the *Saturday Review*, one feels more and more that it is not happy in its job. It is moody, like an actress looking for the right role in order to hit the big time. "Of Literature" has been dropped from the title, an excision the miscellaneous contents of the magazine soundly justifies. The search for feature ideas is as energetic as that of any national magazine; the editors are frantically trying to keep up with the times. With the huge increase in phonograph-record sales, the music departments have absorbed more and more space in the journal. Travel, in all its manifestations, has become an important concern—travel books, travel advice, guides to nearly as many events as *Cue* tries to handle. Even this

is not enough. There are Racing Car issues and SR Goes to the Kitchen. Extraordinary promotion ideas occur to the staff, such as the *Saturday Review Annual Advertising Award*. Lines from an article on this topic read:

Because Saturday Review is continually concerned with the communications pattern in the United States, it has observed with deep interest the progressive development of advertising as a medium of idea communication, a much more subtle skill even than the communication of news.

The cover may "feature" a photograph of Joanne Woodward and recently in an issue that featured Max Eastman's written ideas on Hemingway, not Eastman, but Hemingway, wearing a turtle-neck sweater, gazed from the cover in a "photo-portrait." The book reviews, the long and the short articles, in *Saturday Review* are neither better nor worse than those of the *Times*; they are marked by the same lack of strenuous effort. They obviously have their audience in mind—one, it is believed, that will take only so much.

EDITORS' WISHES

Literary journalism reaches, in the case of a good many writers, such levels of vitality and importance and delight that the excuse of the fleeting moment, the pressure of time, the needs of a large public cannot be accepted, as the editors would have us do. Orville Prescott of the daily *Times*—is he to be accounted a casualty of speed? Is what is wanting in this critic simply time to write, a month rather than a few days? Time would no doubt produce a longer Orville Prescott review, but that it would produce a more constant inspiration is open to doubt. Richard Rovere mentioned somewhere recently the fact that he could find, today, great fascination in reading some casual article done by Edmund Wilson in 1924 for *Vanity Fair* or the *New Republic*. The longer essays Wilson has done in recent years on whatever topic engages his mind are literary works one could hardly expect regularly or even rarely in the *Times*, *Tribune*, or *Saturday Review*. Still, his earlier reviews are the sort of high possibility an editor would, or so one imagines, have in mind. Nothing matters more than the kind of thing the editor would like if he could have his wish. Editorial wishes always partly come true. Does the editor of the *Times Book Review* really yearn for a superb writer like V. S. Pritchett, who *does* write almost weekly short pieces in the *New Statesman* with a week after week brilliance

that astonishes everyone? Pritchett is just as good on "The James Dean Myth" or Ring Lardner as he is on the Russian novel. Is this the kind of thing our journals hope for, or is it a light little piece by, say, Elizabeth Janeway on "Caught between books"? It is typical of the editorial mind of the *Times* that it most frequently assigns Pritchett to write a casual, light London letter, work of insignificant journalism, which makes little use of his unique talents for writing book reviews.

In the end it is publicity that sells books and book reviews are only, at their most, the great toe of the giant. For some recurrent best sellers like Frances Parkinson Keyes and Frank Yerby the readers would no more ask for a good review before giving their approval and their money than a parent would insist upon public acceptance before giving his new baby a kiss. The book publishing and selling business is a very complicated one. Think of those publishers in business-like pursuit of the erotic novel who would, we can be sure, have turned down *Lolita* as not the right kind of sex. It is easy enough, once the commercial success of a book is an established fact, to work out a convincing reason for the public's enthusiasm. But, before the fact has happened, the business is mysterious, chancy, unpredictable.

For instance, it has been estimated that the reviews in *Time* magazine have the largest number of readers, possibly nearly five million each week,

and it has also been suggested that many publishers feel that the reviews in *Time* do not affect the sales of a book one way or another! In the face of this mystery, some publishers have concluded that *Time* readers, having learned *Time's* opinion of a book, feel that they have somehow already read the book, or if not quite that, if not read, at least taken it in, *experienced* it as a "fact of our time." They feel no more need to buy the thing itself than to go to Washington for a firsthand look at the latest works of the Republican Administration.

In a world like that of books where all is angular and unmanageable, there hardly seems to be any true need for these busy hands working to shape it all into a small, fat ball of weekly butter. The adaptable reviewer, the placid, superficial commentator might reasonably survive in local newspapers. But, for the great metropolitan publications, the unusual, the difficult, the lengthy, the intransigent, and above all, the *interesting*, should expect to find their audience.

The views expressed by Miss Hardwick apparently are shared by a considerable number of serious writers. They would be sharply challenged, however, by other writers, book-review editors, and publishers. Letters presenting a different evaluation of book reviewing in America—and in England—will be published in the next issue of Harper's.

—The Editors

The Writer's Task

BY BERNARD MALAMUD

IT SEEMS TO ME that [the writer's] most important task, no matter what the current theory of man, or his prevailing mood, is to recapture his image as human being as each of us in his secret heart knows it to be, and as history and literature have from the beginning revealed it. At the same time the writer must imagine a better world for men the while he shows us, in all its ugliness and beauty, the possibilities of this. In recreating the humanity of man, in reality his greatness, he will, among other things, hold up the mirror to the mystery of him, in which poetry and possibility live, though he has endlessly betrayed them. In a sense, the writer in his art, without directly stating it—though he may preach, his work must not—must remind man that he has, in his human striving, invented nothing less than freedom; and if he will devoutly remember this, he will understand the best way to preserve it, and his own highest value.

I've had something such as this in mind, as I wrote, however imperfectly, my sad and comic tales.

—Address by the Fiction Winner, National Book Awards, New York City, March 1959.