

Cambridge, November 7, 1949

Dear Margaret,

Your letter was waiting for me when I came back this afternoon from a very busy and confusing day. I liked your letter, although there was much criticism in it, or perhaps because of the criticism. All that you say is true and valid even if its application to me is incongruous. I think it is true that more often than not the critic criticizes his own faults as he sees them reflected in others. I cannot say whether this generalization applies to you, but I know that most of my own criticism is the expression of my own faults rather than the recognition of someone else's error.

Besides the criticism, I liked the calmness and serenity of your lines. For myself, I find it difficult to write when so many conflicting thoughts and emotions are fighting within me. Depending upon my mood I give the victory first to the one, then to the other, until my thoughts and I are all exhausted and my work, like a welcome sea, floods the confusion. Have you noticed how a single wave can deprive contours in the sand of their sharpness? It smoothes all irregularities and obliterates the footprints of men and birds alike, leaving the sand moist, smooth and unworn.

My life is not like that. To what shall I compare myself? A piece of paper, perhaps, on which a story is to be written. Someone sits at a desk for hours pondering on the first sentence; he can find none suitable. This one is too short and abrupt, the other not clear or effective. He sits and considers for so long, because in truth he has nothing to say. And then the determined attempt, buttressed by all available ideas and clothed in the most fluent style: the written word is too honest a mirror. None of the initial imperfections are lost to it. The dilettante realizes his poverty.

What can he do but erase and begin from the beginning again. Of course he does not know yet that his failure was not a matter of accident, but the inevitable result of his own emptiness. He repeats his attempts but the results remain the same. Only the paper wears thin from the repeated erasure. My life is like a piece of paper for which I had magnificent ambitions. When I hold it up to the light now, I can see that it has almost worn through.

You must excuse me now, because while I have many feelings, I have no words which they can wear. How can they go out in winter, - for it is winter now, - without freezing? I have no clothes to suit them, and I am too proud to dress up my feelings in second-hand things, or the kind of garment that everybody buys in Filene's bargain basement. I could borrow ~~some~~ words, but I should have to repay them some day, and then you would know that I had been a liar.

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Good night, Margaret. I hope the letters you write are not as hard for you as mine are for me. I wish that you might have as much substance of life to pour into my letters and make them meaningful as I have for yours. My mistake is always the same: I pour too hastily, it overflows and makes an unsightly picture.

I think of you often; my thoughts are prayers. For you I ask for a happiness far beyond me; for myself I ask for forgiveness.

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