

Cambridge, January 8, 1950

Dear Margaret,

My watch says midnight, but doubtlessly it is later already. My watch turned awry last night, I overslept Biggs this morning, and my day was warped. Tonight Alex and I heard a good performance of parts four, five and six of the Christmas Oratorio; I thought of you and wished you might have been here.

Just now I was rewriting two pages of my Hofmannsthal essay, and I forgot to readjust the mechanism for single-spacing. - I must be tired. Probably my watch is considerably slow. I wrote about methodology in criticism of which my paper is supposedly an illustration. I said that I did not think it valuable that criticism should delight in sensational assertions, as does T.S. Eliot when he proclaims Hamlet an artistic failure. The critic need not always be an iconoclast; nor should he make it his pasttime to play with literature, the way Nicky plays with a yo-yo, to discover to his own amusement and the amazement of his admirers oblique aspects in every work of art. What we need is more devotion and less sophistication, more humility and less vanity, more reverence and less artifice in criticism. We must learn to approach art with patience and love. - That is what I told Posselt in my essay.

My admittance to medical school has made me bold and outspoken and probably indiscreet and perhaps even foolish. I have nothing to lose, and what I gain is the satisfaction of drawing a line and separating myself from what I feel is foreign to me. - Tuesday afternoon Harvard will inform me of its decision. The interview seemed moderately successful and I believe that there is a fair chance of my being accepted. - As you see, I am getting tired, and the ideas which are neatly separate in my mind run together on paper, like the colors of socks in the laundry.

What is most on my mind is my constant criticism of the immediate and distant environment. At worst it could be an urge to derogation and destruction, a compensation for personal insufficiencies; at best it would be a translation of the constant examination of my own actions and their motivation to the people and situations which cause and affect them. Probably it is a mixture somewhere between extremes. But what shall I do? What makes the situation even bitterer for me is the knowledge that you would think I was wrong, that I was egotistical, and would take sides with everything which hurts and depresses me, - or at best you would maintain a benevolent neutrality. If only I could carry out the logical scheme. All my life I have been drawing a magic circle around the place where I stand; on my side were always only very few people, sometimes one, and sometimes none. And now you get in the way of the chalk which draws the line that separates me from what hurts me. You stand in the way, you cannot, - or will not, - come on my side, and I do not have the strength to push you out of the way of the chalk that draws the magic circle, - for I would hurt both you and myself, and probably lose my equilibrium in the attempt. Please do not stand in the doorway too long. I must close the door, because it is very cold outside, and there is not much coal. My feet are cold, and my fingers will get stiff,

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and I will not be able to practice violin. Besides everything will freeze. Please do not stand in the doorway too long. Best I forget myself and try to close the door while you are still there. I would hurt you, and the door would shatter, and I would become very ill, and perhaps never recover, because I cannot live without doors.

Where will you go? Which way, in or out? I can see no way for your coming in, I have built such a defence. Perhaps you see a way to come in; angels, I think, can penetrate the most elaborate defenses. Humans must break them. But be careful of what you break. For goodness' sake, close the door, if you want to come in. - If you will go away, you can do so gently, without making much noise, and when I know that you are gone, and when I am sure I will no longer hurt you, I shall get up to close the door after you. I will turn out the light then, and go to sleep, and dream that I were playing Bach, a violin concerto, without effort and without mistake. An orchestra of angels were accompanying me, and God himself was the conductor.

Just now I was rewriting two pages of my Holmanstahl essay, and I forgot to readjust the mechanism for single-spacing. - I must be good night. My watch says it is fifteen minutes past twelve. I am in criticism of which my paper is supposedly an illustration. I said that I think it valuable that criticism should delight in sensational assertions, as does T.S. Eliot when he proclaims Hamlet an artistic failure. The critic need not always be an iconoclast; nor should he make it his pastime to play with literature, the way Nicky plays with a yo-yo, to discover to his own amusement and the amazement of his admirers obscure aspects in every work of art. What we need is more devotion and less sophistication, more humility and less vanity, more reverence and less artifice in criticism. We must learn to approach art with patience and love. - That is what I told Hoffmann in my essay.

John

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