EVER SINCE the seventeenth century, when authors began soliciting customers to buy their books and thus confer money and fame on them, vanity and vainglory have been their constant temptation, neglect and contempt their frequent reward. Thus, as Samuel Johnson says in *The Rambler*,

> No place affords a more striking conviction of the vanity of human hopes than a public library. For who can see the wall crowded on every side by mighty volumes, the works of laborious meditation and accurate inquiry, now scarcely known but by the catalog... without considering how many hours have been wasted in vain endeavors, how often imagination has anticipated the praises of futurity, [and] how many statues have risen to the eye of vanity...

When Johnson came to write *Lives of the Poets*, one of his themes was the comic-pathetic disappointments of authors whose expectations had been dashed by the disdain of the world. The scholar Walter Harte is for Johnson a case in point. In 1759 he published an immense book, the

> History of Gustavus Adolphus. "Poor man!" says Johnson. "He left London the day of... publication... that he might be out of the way of the great praise he was to receive; and he was ashamed to return when he found how ill his book had succeeded."

When in the early nineteenth century Isaac D'Israeli compiled a series of anecdotes about writers, he titled it *Calamities of Authors*. A few items from his index will indicate the tenor:

> Drayton's national work, the Polyoibion, ill received, and the author greatly dejected.
> Hume, his literary life, how mortified with disappointments
> Walpole, Horace, his literary mortifications

Contemporary writers have their calamities, too, and their complaints are legion. Their manuscripts are rejected, sometimes without explanation. If they are awarded a contract, when publication day arrives their
Imagine what mortification it is for an author to pass through crummy discount bookstores and see great piles of his masterpiece stacked up on the remainder tables, marked down from $14.95 to $1.95, and moving sluggishly even then. He will feel worse when he gets home and finds that his contract specifies that he gets no royalty on copies sold at remainder prices. That is the nadir.

We should not be ashamed of ourselves if we find these misfortunes essentially comic. After all, no one is obliged to become an author. Every author is, in a sense, showing off; and in the view of the world he has elected a very easy job. He works at his own pace and on his own schedule, supervised by no boss and under no obligation to be nice to people he doesn't like; he pursues his trade comfortably sitting down in private while others are carrying hoods or sweating in front of klieg lights while forgetting their lines, or arguing in a courtroom or being squirted with blood at an operating table or being beaten up every Sunday on a football field. The writer has it soft, and his moans must strike the more active part of the world as a very funny. The news that few authors with a publisher are largely out of business is bad reviews. An author's relations with a publisher are largely out of his control; he is not the one who prints it. Kingsley Martin, editor of the New Statesman, tells of lunching amiably with H. G. Wells. The same week his journal musings, what an author is tormented by when confronted with a bad notice is less the damage he fears to his sales than the damage suffered by his social sense. All these years he's been talking about his forthcoming book and coming on as something special to his friends and acquaintances, and suddenly someone announces to the whole country that he's a phony—a slob, actually, lazy and ignorant, pretentious, tasteless, and inept.

What part [of the author] is affected by [the reviewer's] bite?—what is the true nature of the emotion he causes? That is a complex question: but perhaps we can discover something that will serve as answer by submitting the author to a simple test. Take a sensitive author and place before him a hostile review. Symptoms of pain and anger rapidly develop. Next tell him that nobody save himself will read those abusive remarks. In five or ten minutes the pain which, if the attack had been delivered in public, would have lasted a week and bred bitter rancor, is completely over. The temperature falls; indifference returns. This proves that the sensitive part is the reputation; what the victim feared was the effect of abuse upon the opinion that other people had of him. He is afraid, too, of the effect of abuse upon his purse. But the purse sensitivity is in most cases far less highly developed than the reputation sensitivity. As for the artist's sensibility—his own opinion of his own work—that is not touched by anything good or bad that the reviewer says about it.

Some authors are so sensitive in their reputation part that in their view a hostile notice implicates not just the one who writes it but also the editor who prints it. Kingsley Martin, editor of the New Statesman, tells of lunching amiably with H. G. Wells. The same week his journal had published a savage review of Wells's latest novel. "On Monday morning I found a card from H. G. which began: 'So you really had that stinker up your sleeve when you greeted me so warmly last Tuesday,'
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and ended by saying that I was a cad.” Martin’s reply:

My dear H. G.,

With your note in front of me it takes some effort to recall that you are not really the vain and abusive little man that its petulance would suggest. . . .

When I saw you . . . I was friendly because I felt friendly to H. G., whom I have always admired and to whom I owe a great deal of my mental furniture. I knew nothing of your new book. . . . I did not know to whom it had been sent for review or whether a review had been written. It was not in my mind. . . .

But that is not the point. The important question is how you can think that if I had seen the review or known that we were printing an unfavorable review of your book, I would somehow have behaved differently. Do you mean to suggest that because a reviewer had written something unfavorable to you . . . I should therefore cut you when I met you? Or that I should be in tears or blushing from shame? Or what do you suggest? Or can it be that you imagine that when I saw that an unfavorable notice of your book had reached the paper I ought to have said ‘My old friend H. G. Wells will not like this review, and therefore I cannot print this reviewer’s honest opinion of his book. . . . What would you say, supposing you had written a review and then the Editor explained that he could not print your criticism because he was a friend of the author or did not like to hurt his feelings?”

Martin grasps entirely the principle about the ethics of authorship enunciated by Johnson over a century and a half earlier: “An author places himself uncalled before the tribunal of criticism, and solicits fame at the hazard of disgrace.”

But even though in their more lucid moments of moral understanding authors would agree with Johnson, in practice, vanity and the affectation of delicate sensibility frequently drive then to intemperate despair over bad reviews. Tennyson, Woolf

minds us, at one point was so cast down by reviews of his work that he “actually contemplated emigration.” More recently, May Sarton, novelist and poet, has expressed her conviction that an abusive notice of one of her novels in The New York Times Book Review caused her to suffer something close to nervous collapse, culminating in a sarcoma of the breast and a mastectomy. “I know that the amount of suppressed rage I have suffered since last fall had to find some way out.” Sarton writes in Recovering: A Journal, which describes her year-long agony. Sorry as one is for May Sarton’s illness and surgery, her book makes an instructive document for the pathologist of literary vanity.

Johnson knew that, looked at correctly—that is, without vanity—there’s no such thing as a bad review. Boswell reports: “He remarked that attacks on authors did them much service. ‘A man who tells me my play is very bad is less my enemy than he who lets it die in silence. A man whose business it is to be talked of is much helped by being attacked.’” Traveling in Scotland, Johnson heard Sir John Dalrymple complain about some bad reviews of his Memoirs. Johnson said: “Nay, sir, do not complain. It is advantageous to an author that his book should be attacked as well as praised. Fame is a shuttlecock. If it be struck at only one end of the room, it will soon fall to the ground. To keep it up, it must be struck at both ends.”

Experienced authors know that it’s less the tenor than the length of the review that counts. I’ve winced at a hostile review (“a sad disappointment”; “well-informed fatuity”; “chirpy facetiousness”; “prissy hauteur”) and a few hours later met people who’ve read it and remembered it as highly laudatory. What they’re remembering is the size of the review and its position in the format, and they will hasten to buy the book and expect to find great merit in it, recalling that some national periodical took it seriously, that is, gave it a lot of space. Unfavorable observations in reviews tend to be remembered only by authors or reviewers, very seldom by readers.

While abandoning a multitude of former literary genres—like the sermon, the theatrical prologue in verse, the ethical essay, and the Arthurian narrative poem—our age has formulated few new ones. One generic invention we’ll probably be credited with—if that’s the term—is the “documentary” novel about real-life murderers, like Capote’s In Cold Blood or Mailer’s The Executioner’s Song. Another is the little self-celebratory classified ad in the Personal column of outlets such as the New York Review of Books, offering one’s body genteelly for sexual uses. A third modern genre also finds its home in the New York Review of Books, although it’s also to be seen in the Times Literary Supplement and The New York Times Book Review, as well as the British New Statesman and Spectator.

This is what I’d call the A.B.M.—the Author’s Big Mistake—that is, the letter from an aggrieved writer complaining about a review. He has sent out his book for acclamation. Encountering contempt instead, he has instantly taken pen in hand to right this great wrong. The little lyric Personal ad and the letter from an ill-reviewed author are not as distinct generically as one might imagine at first glance. Each constitutes a little arena of a very twentieth-century sort of insecure egotism and self-concern, and a critic would be hard pressed to decide which speaks the more pitiable dependence on external shows of esteem.

Just as the abuse sometimes visited on authors gratifies many readers, so these letters have something irresistibly comic about them. Sputtering away, the veins of their foreheads standing out, these little compositions generally deliver the most naked view of the author’s wounded vanity. And never with subtlety, for they are conceived in fury and scribbled in haste.

The dynamics of the A.B.M. are as follows: the author reads the review, at first with disbelief, then, as he realizes others will read it too, with passion. Instead of sleeping on the matter for a week or so, or, bet---
ter, simply getting on with his next book, he rushes to his typewriter and vents his sense of injured merit in five hundred or a thousand words. He is too impatient to revise, and he certainly feels no impulse to keep his piece nine years. Rage propels him out to the mailbox, and for the next few weeks rage causes him to tap his foot and with knitted brow to make sudden little sideways movements of his head, incomprehensible to his friends, few of whom have seen the review. (Among those who have, half have mistaken it for a good notice; the other half secretly agree with most of it, while still liking the author just as much as before.) Finally there arrives a copy of the offending periodical, and in it is the author's letter of complaint. Only now it doesn't look the way it looked in the author's typewriter. It's not been altered at all by the editor, or even shortened. But now it reads as if some puling adolescent, cut from the high school basketball team, has published a letter about how good he really is, and written it not very well. All the author's sarcastic rebuttals now seem both too broad and too lame, inviting the reader to regard him as an even greater ass and loser than before.

There are certain inviolable conventions in these letters. The main one is to open by asserting that one doesn't write them. Thus:

To the Editor:
A copy of the review of ___ has just reached me in Australia. It is not my practice to comment on a review. But...
(The New York Times Book Review)

To the Editors:  
Generally speaking one does not answer hostile reviews, especially self-refuting ones. But it would be a pity if readers...  
(New York Review of Books)

The tradition is that authors should not question too much utterances of those who review their books. Normally, I adhere to this tradition. But a review of my latest book... raises an issue of

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“Belongs with the best war memoirs ever written. Tough, powerful, shocking.”—Los Angeles Times

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Joel Agee’s Twelve Years: An American Boyhood in East Germany at $14.95 each (includes postage). N.Y. residents please add sales tax.

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principle which... 
(New Statesman)

Other conventions of the A.B.M. are self-pity and self-praise. A classic performance in self-pity is the opening chord of Jan Morris's letter about her memoir of her gender change, Conundrum:

Sir,—Your cruel review of my Conundrum (April 26) reduced me to tears, of course, as its author doubtless intended; but I comforted myself with the thought that...

(Times Literary Supplement)

Sometimes the self-pity is more subtle, while aspiring to be just as heartrending. Thus:

I accept full responsibility for the too numerous misprints, explaining only that the proofreading had to be undertaken while I was in hospital.

(Times Literary Supplement)

Sometimes the letter opens with a would-be ingratiating display of wit, as if to demonstrate that the writer is not really so angry as to be disabled from generating a little playful sarcasm:

Sir,—I am sorry that one of the grounds on which your reviewer... objects to my book... is that it is weighty. That however is probably the reason that, far from being unable to put it down, he was hardly able to take it up. It may account too for the inaccuracies and ineptness of his complaints—though not excuse them any more than it excuses the ill-tempered dismissiveness which they make evident...

(Times Literary Supplement)

In these letters a favorite form of self-praise is the citation of an authority greater than the reviewer. So:

To the Editors:

acusses me of attempting to go behind ---'s poetry, so I will refrain from speculating what could lie behind her extraordinary vindictive review of my book. For whatever it's worth, [the poet in question] liked the portions of my book that he read in manuscript; thought that my style was "fine"; and in his last letter to me, writ-

ten weeks before his death, wished me "good luck with your book." That matters infinitely more to me than the polemics of his post-humous spokesman...

(New York Review of Books)

Sometimes other reviewers can be invoked, in order to create the impression that this one bad review is merely an aberration—that, indeed, the whole reviewing fraternity has not agreed that your book is terrible:

This kind of reviewing, unfortunately now too common, which in effect helps to bar a writer's communication and denies his right to it, is intellectual hooliganism. I am happy that two other reviewers, --- and ---, who, one cannot doubt, know what they are talking about, have actually discussed my thesis and arguments, putting forward reasonable criticism while maintaining a favorable account.

(Times Literary Supplement)

Here's another nice one—so good that the reader may suspect, unjustly, that I have made it up. Now the complainant is not the author of the book reviewed, but merely someone patronized in passing. But notice that this writer, in addition to delivering a full measure of self-praise, also honors the A.B.M.'s other conventions.

To the Editors:

In his review of ---'s, --- referred to and used my critical study... noting that I was not "competent to discuss the classical background" of ---'s fiction. Ordinarily such an outrageous charge would not merit a rejoinder. However, since I was trained as a classicist who taught his discipline and published in the field before moving into Comparative Literature, I cannot allow ---'s irresponsibility to go unchallenged."

My greatest satisfaction comes from the fact that I pleased the late Gilbert Highet, to whom the book was dedicated and who was not above sending me errata. Gilbert Highet is a name to reckon with. Frankly, I never heard of ---.

(New York Review of Books)

It's clear that editors are very fond of printing these letters. One reason is fairly obvious: they add the drama of personal conflict to their normally gray pages. Another reason is that the letters are almost always funny, offering readers the spectacle of some pompous self-celebrator given ample ironic room in which to parade his self solicited hurt.

But the main reason editors like these letters is that they supply a lot of signed copy the editors don't have to pay for. The principle has been thoroughly mastered by the publishers of sex magazines like Forum. They have learned that once you establish for the publication a tradition of lubricious self-praise, you can fill a third of a monthly magazine with fascinating copy at no cost whatever. The same principle operates with more genteel people. If sufficiently angry, an author who normally wouldn't think of writing a thousand words without payment is delighted to supply them for nothing in order to engage in his little dance of self-justification. To eke out their free copy further, editors often try to cajole the original reviewer into composing an "answer" to the complaint. The best advice to reviewers is that ascribed to the British Foreign Office: never explain, never apologize. And, in addition, never write without payment. If ever tempted to a comment, reviewers should be adamant about not responding to an author who complains that he's been "misunderstood." If he has been, it's his fault, and no comment is called for. It's his fault because, as a writer, he's supposed to be adept in matters of lucid address and explanation, and if he's failed there, he's failed everywhere.

But what should an author do if he receives an ecstatic review, one he imagines fully "understands" him and values his book at its true worth? Should he write a different kind of letter, this one to the reviewer, thanking him and praising him for his perception? The answer is precisely the same as with the bad review: never. As usual, Johnson, the first professional writer to think seriously about the ethics of the trade, has the
best word: “Such acknowledgments... never can be proper, since they must be paid either for flattery or justice.”

Silence is the author’s only proper recourse, unless he wants to publish a letter like this, which I have never seen and never expect to see:

Sir,—Decent reviewing is something every author has a right to expect, and consequently I was distressed to read Mr. ———’s laudatory review of my Sanitary Engineering in Belgium and the Low Countries, which entirely fails to mention the clumsy prose in which much of my book is couched—I was not feeling well two summers ago—and wholly overlooks the slick reasoning by which I make the transit from Part I to Part II, not to mention the inadequacies of the index, which I wrote myself, and the pretentiousness of the jacket blurb, which your reviewer ignorantly imputes to the mendacity of my publisher but which is actually of my own composition.

Your readers deserve better than this. I am, sir,

Yours faithfully,

HARPER’S/FEBRUARY 1982

TO THE EDITORS OF HARPER’S:

In his review of Paul Mariani’s William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked (“Breaking the Line,” Harper’s, December 1981), Hugh Kenner writes of Williams that “In his mid-seventies he was still being rejected by the Hudson Review....” This statement is untrue. It is, moreover, Kenner’s own fabrication: there is no basis for it in Mariani’s biography. The truth is that neither in Dr. Williams’s mid-seventies, nor at any previous time, was anything of his ever rejected by The Hudson Review. On the contrary, we had the pleasure of publishing his work on a number of occasions.

Here, for the record, is the list of Williams’s appearances in The Hudson Review, six in all. In 1956, three poems: “The Gift,” “Calypso,” and “The Title”; in 1957, the long and important story “The Farmers’ Daughters”; in 1960, “Pictures from Brueghel,” a ten-page sequence of poems; again in 1960, two poems: “Paul” and “Suzy”; in 1961, four poems: “The Dance,” “Jersey Lyric,” “The Woodthrush,” and “He has beaten about the bush long enough”; and in 1963, posthumously, four last poems: “The Art,” “Greeting for Old Age,” “Still Lifes,” and “Trala Trala Trala La-Le-La.” Robert Lowell’s moving tribute to Williams (in which he states that “Williams is part of the great breath of our literature. Paterson is our Leaves of Grass....”) was published by us in 1961: Kenner acknowledges this, but with a sneer.

Although we would not have hesitated to return to Williams any poem or story which we felt to be of inferior quality (he himself, aware of the unevenness of some of his work, would in his generosity have been the first to approve), we in point of fact never had to do this. We liked everything he sent us: we accepted it all. One poem which he submitted to us was withdrawn when he learned that it was being published in another magazine, to which a friend had sent a copy; another poem, sent in at a later date, was called back by him for repairs—then resubmitted to us and published by us. Nothing was “rejected.” Accordingly, Kenner’s recollection that he “stood by once” as Williams opened a letter of rejection from us must be accounted a false memory.

Williams not only published in The Hudson Review, he also read it (or, in his illness, had it read to him), and evidently enjoyed it. In a letter which I cherish, sent to me after his death, Mrs. Williams wrote me that “Bill liked Hudson Review and I read it to him from cover to cover... so thank you for giving us many hours of rewarding reading.”

FREDERICK MORGAN
Editor
The Hudson Review
New York, N.Y.