Answers to Your Questions

Q: Don't you think your opinions are somewhat sensational?

A: One of the charming habits to be observed in this wonderful democracy is the perfect composure with which the young are rude to the old, compensating themselves for their ignorance with an abuse that is innocently and assertively expressed, thus establishing an exquisite equality that eliminates the tiresome bother to have to acquire experience and makes the bawling infant identical to the senile octogenarian. Well, to answer you: as far as this book is concerned, there is not a single opinion in it that is exclusively mine. The ideas in it are derived from Henry James, Flaubert, and others, and each idea has either been preceded by or followed by or has an implied allusion to a quotation to make it quite clear that it bears the authority of someone whose own example in the creation of fiction leaves no doubt that he knows exactly what is being talked about and that his opinion on the matter is the correct one. Therefore, every opinion in this book is incontestably correct. The only purpose that I have served has been to save you the trouble of spending years discovering the sources for yourself. The really serious ones among you will go and read everything for yourselves and proceed with both humility and excitement to learn to be worthy of the art, but, the majority being inevitably composed of lazy sods on the lookout for a short cut, most students will be grateful that I have supplied them with what perhaps amounts to a dictionary of quotations with which they can go and impress the ignorant.

Q: But surely the attack on Hemingway is yours? James and Flaubert were dead when he was around.

A: To be precise, I have not attacked Hemingway, only shown you how two texts by him are to be read if you care to look closely at the structure of the form and the language in which they are presented. If anyone is attacked, it is those among you.
who have assumed you were looking at a great writer and have never bothered to examine the language to see how poorly it has been put together. I have only applied the lessons learned from James, Flaubert, and others, and in an important sense I think it can be said that what may appear to be my opinions on the more recent writers are really what would have been said by James and Flaubert, for I am nothing more than a posthumous voice for those writers of the past whom we think about when we think about literature.

Q: Are you not conveniently hiding behind your own idols? You make challenging and provocative statements and then say they are only the statements that a James or a Flaubert might have made.

A: James and Flaubert are not my exclusive idols and if you wish to accuse me of hiding behind them then you must be prepared to level the same accusation against just about every writer of any consequence who has followed James and Flaubert. Needless to say, one runs a considerable personal risk when one undertakes to criticise entrenched reputations. One is attacked for presuming to profess a superior knowledge for nothing brings people's blood to a boil with such instantaneous speed than observations which challenge opinions long and complacently held to be sacred. It is always perilous to appear to be adopting a prophet's stance among the ignorant. If not crucified, one is unlikely to escape mindless rudeness and insults from the blindly pious for whom literature is a rosary of received ideas to be mouthed thoughtlessly and eternally. But a teacher who is too timid to take the risk will teach little: he will have reduced his task to that of a priest whose job is to perpetuate the old superstitions.

Q: We are touched by your modesty, but how genuine is it?

A: It is very similar to your conception of your own talent, which is to say you and I are creatures of vanity, and will take up any stance as long as we are convinced that someone can be made to believe that our pathetic limp is in fact the stride of an Olympic champion.

Q: When writing my stories, should I always think in terms of realism?