

Revolution on Campus

The young girl who sidled into my office looked as if she had fought her way through a riot of enemies. Her brown hair was beaten into disorder, with here and there a desperate bobby pin hanging on by the tips of its fingers. Her slip hung well below her skirt as if deliberately yanked there. Straps snarled into sight at her shoulder.

When she said, "I have brought some poems," her voice had the remote hush of someone speaking from an echo chamber.

But the poems were wonderful meditations of whales and fleas and angels startled from telephone wires in small-town alleys. It was then I noticed that her eyes completely possessed her body and gave a central shape of living brown to a face whose features otherwise had hardly any relation to each other. Behind those eyes, I later discovered, was the true, glittering imagination of the artist. Physically and temperamentally, she would have seemed to many the embodiment of Greenwich Village. What had brought her to a university?

A new thing is happening in America, something which gives such a talented girl encouragement and direction, something which may affect the whole course of our literature. For now the young writer has the middle ground of the college, with its other young writers and its teachers of writing, who are usually writers themselves. No longer does such a beginning poet have to choose between the fiery but often destroying incandescence of New York and the lonely spark of his own isolation in any of ten thousand towns across the continent. He does not have to go where there are too many writers talking too much and pushing him into continual distractions from the labor of writing, nor where there are so few writers (there may be none at all) that he may wonder whether what he is trying to do is justified, valuable or even honest.

In many colleges today the young writer can find enough warmth to thaw out the chill of his troubled isolation, and enough coolness of critical judgment to strengthen him in the vision and labor of writing. This combination brought that young woman poet to my office; yet thirty years ago, or even twenty, it is doubtful that a university would have seemed like a safe place for her to bring her talent. The university has traditionally been looked up as a deadly place which waited with a club to kill any creative quality the young

mind brought to it. That lush ivy on the walls was never intended to wreath poets, but to give a false green to the gray study of poets safely dead. Didn't Oxford throw out Shelley? Didn't Longfellow sneak sideways into Harvard not as a poet but as a professor of modern languages?

But suppose writers are tolerated in our colleges, won't they be thwarted? Or will any system trying to combine genuine imaginative activity with teaching and study be doomed? I believe the answer lies in such names as those that follow.

Early this spring a first novel of extraordinary energy of language and attitude and symbol was published: *The Cannibal*, by John Hawkes. Where did Mr. Hawkes write that manuscript? In a college writing class, of course, one taught by Albert Guerard, Jr. at Harvard. If the remark can be forgiven apropos of Mr. Hawkes's title, it looks as if something more is simmering in the academic pot than the too-often cooked-over bones of our ancestors.

This May, Peter Taylor published *A Woman of Means*, a brilliant first novel about the insights and agonies of a young boy's response to his father's second marriage. Where did Mr. Taylor write that book? At the Woman's College of North Carolina, where he was teaching writing. Where had Mr. Taylor worked at his earliest writing? Naturally, he had studied with John Crowe Ransom at Kenyon College, with Robert Penn Warren when he was at Louisiana State University, and first of all with Allen Tate.

Random House published a first novel, *So Many Doors*, by Oakley Hall, in July, and in September will bring out another, *The Eagle on the Coin*, by R. V. Cassill. Where were these novels written? Both were done in the Writer's Workshop for graduate students at the University of Iowa, and both replaced the usual thesis for an advanced degree. When Mr. Hall left the Marine Corps and Mr. Cassill the Army, they went back to the university not merely to study but to begin their writing careers. Continuing the pattern, both now teach writing at the University of Iowa.

Today chances are very good that, if you meet a young writer, he is in a writing course somewhere, has just come from one or, if he has published, is on his way to teach in one (or wishes he were going to). The American college has in many places turned out to be the only public patron of writing we have. Little fires of creative activity have flared up from coast to coast where colleges have encouraged students to look on the effort of writing literature as somehow quite as natural as the effort of reading it.

But is this a large enough movement to justify speaking of it as a national trend? Or is it a chance gesture, made here and there by

some erring or daring head of an English Department? It is a solid thing, running from coast to coast and from north to south. Quietly, it has come to be one of those revolutions in academic life which do, surprisingly, happen. Look at the record.

After residence on many campuses, that rugged and unacademic poet Robert Frost accepted a post that will keep him at Amherst for the rest of his life. Archibald MacLeish has just gone to Harvard, not as a rhetorician but quite openly as a practicing poet. Theodore Morrison, himself the author of books of poems, has for years been hiring young writers to teach English to Harvard Freshmen, teachers like the poet John Ciardi.

At Yale, Cleanth Brooks is teaching, there for the young writer who wishes to profit from the superb critical faculty which Mr. Brooks brings to his own writings. At Princeton, R. P. Blackmur is available for the student who wishes to write, as are A. B. Guthrie at Kentucky, Hudson Strode at Alabama, Harris Downey at Louisiana State, Kerker Quinn at Illinois, Allan Seager at Michigan, Brewster Ghiselin at Utah, Wallace Stegner and Yvor Winters at Stanford, Mark Schor at California, Martha Foley at Columbia. All of these are working at their own writing. They are not interested in encouraging fools, yearners, casual aesthetes who take time the teacher prefers to put on his own writing. But they will all help develop that original talent which no college can give to anyone.

There are many other colleges with work in writing besides those I have named. If the student wants to do commercial writing, he would do well to seek out Walter Campbell at Oklahoma. If he wishes to take to degree at the graduate level so he can himself teach as a career, he can go to several places. The University of Iowa, where Hansford Martin, R. V. Cassill and Ray B. West all teach writing, is the only one which offers to the writer all degrees through the Ph.D., including the Master of Fine Arts, which is uniquely designed for the writer alone.

What sort of student attends such course? Not your traditional college dilettante, aloof, mumbling across the campus, but a visiting Canadian writing about the R.C.A.F. or a poet from any of forty-eight states. These students are intense about writing. One teacher found a note impaled on his office door by a dripping dagger: "I have a new story. Be here at 4:00 or else." But mostly they are determined to learn all that can be taught (and while knowing that all certainly cannot be taught) from people who have proved in their own books that they have at least faced the problems. The college can attract students who would never otherwise return after getting a B.A. There was a schoolteacher in a western city writing nights and weekends, year after

year to the astonishment of her family and suspicion of her neighbors, and not knowing herself whether what she was doing was dreadful, hopeful or really good. She came in considerable doubt to take, along with conventional courses in literature, one in creative writing. She found that her work was quite exceptional, went on to improve every year, has had her stories published, has given up teaching, has had her whole life altered by the fact that such a university course was waiting to encourage her.

There was a boy on a Minnesota farm, rough farm with stone and timber. He too wrote in scraps of time and in deep uncertainty. Coming by the hardest effort to a college, he entered a writing class, wrote hard, as hard as he had farmed and with the same rough hands, lived with his manuscript every minute of every day, carried it with him to classes, to restaurants, on trips. He left it in the men's room of a railroad station, and after that locked a carbon copy in a bank vault. He plowed that furrow through to the end, published his novel, won a prize of \$1.000 and bought a set of dishes for the farm and a dining-room table to put them on.

A girl from the southern mountains used to come to class with a tatting shuttle. All through the reading and criticizing of stories she moved it through intricate patterns. A week later she would come to class wearing the finished design around her neck. For six months we could hardly grasp her simplest remark, so profound was her accent and so muffled the words, and yet her narrative prose rolled with the fluency of a wheel over the written page. Her book was full of wild characters and unreal events which she proved to be absolutely true on the printed page.

A Swede came from Stockholm to write a novel (fortunately, in English) about German spies in Sweden. He wore a huge military fur cap and used to tell how Swedes traveled from the Arctic Circle to hear Duke Ellington when he played in Stockholm. There were two writers from the Philippines who had been with the guerrillas and wrote about the little towns on mountain slopes, the great and harrowing flight of entire village into the forest, and the hollow bamboo stalks full of strong drink.

As you see, most of these were people who would not have gone to a college offering simply the standard courses. They have enlivened the academic world.

No teacher can make a writer out of someone without talent, but given talent he can mature it faster. The young writer can be taught to read closely and thus to write closely. He can be saved years of time fumbling with his own errors and false directions. The beginner has always tried to find an older writer to go to for advice. All the college does is to formalize, a little, this relationship. It's an

apprenticeship known to be available. American colleges have lately believed anything can be taught. Now you can learn how to make batik designs, how to bake a cake, how to have a successful marriage, and how to tell the sex of a newborn chick (no natural sequence). The young writer, writhing his way through the doubts and delays of his first work, can be straightened out. This must be a personal matter, which means that courses in writing cannot be rigidly conducted.

John Crowe Ransom taught Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren at Vanderbilt. Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren have gone on to teach Peter Taylor and Robert Lowell. Peter Taylor is now teaching writing in North Carolina and Robert Lowell at the University of Iowa. This is the thing that has happened. It works. It works for writers. It may give American writers that enriched background and that more rigorous training which are needed to keep our new writers from succumbing to the pattern of so many of our older ones--writing books in the middle and later periods of their lives which are no better than their early ones.

These communities of creative writing across the country are a small answer, both to the student and to the teacher, of this country's need for many places in various regions where the writer may resist the lures of high-paid journalism, or the trap of writing what he doesn't want to write in order to keep his family fed. At a university, he can write what he pleases, freed from the strain of competitiveness. There is a danger in the remoteness from the tangle of reality, in the temptation to intellectual pride. But the writer is now committed to the university. Our literature will be powerfully affected as more and more young writers go through course in writing, learning more rapidly and more intensely than they would alone that large critical part of the creative process which can be discovered and talked about.

No European university has ever tried this American Experiment of bringing the creative imagination into its academic life. And it has not come here without bitter resistance which still goes on; still there are many who feel that the only good writer is a dead one with his scalp lifted into a card index. But out of the grotesque disorder of our system of elective courses has come this chance for the creative act. This country will have a different cultural character because of it.

---Flair, August, 1950

Poet and Professor Overture

The presence of so many poets at our American colleges means that many people believe poets are born, but they can be half-made. The creative talent cannot be created, but once it is discovered it can be shaped and nourished and matured. But is there not a danger here? Will every talent be bent in the direction which is the teacher's own, rather than being helped to find its own native direction? I think this is a real danger and that it has happened. In the teaching of poetry, as in all our human experience, variety is a powerful virtue. No form or attitude must be imposed; dare the young poet to find his own. Refer him always to the great examples, shove his poem up against the valid verse of his own time, but honor his pains by letting them work the words in their own obstinate way.

The hope in criticizing a young poet's writing is to make him his own self-critic. Knock the tenderness toward his own poems out of him before the remote critic knocks the poems out of him. A poet's adolescence begins when he can look at a new poem ruthlessly. With some this occurs amazingly young, with some it is sadly delayed, and some die without having had their poetic voice change.

But I was arguing above that poetry is not merely glandular, that whatever secretion of the mind causes it can, to a limited degree, be affected. This is why poets are at colleges, in the effort to affect not simply the old concerns of study, things factual and speculative, but things imaginative as well. This has not happened in the world's history before. In the end, it may be the one unique quality American contributes to education. It may have arisen because of our peculiar need to organize all human activity, or because of our sense that anything is a proper concern of a university, whether determining the sex of little chicks or the hex of folklore.

The college may give the poet a small community where he can live congenially, in the security of practicing his art as a respectable trade. Let it be a place where the uncertain poet can find confidence and the too sure poet can be knocked down a few times. In a country with American distances we need such communities scattered from coast to coast.

The young writer has always looked to the older for advice ("load every rift with ore"), and the college has now formalized this relationship a little. But as important as teaching is the fact that young poets instruct each other, by plain association, by counter criticism in class, by watching the way in which each sweats out the tangles of word by word and line by line. The teacher is lucky too, for he learns by

the sudden thrust of insight from his students, from the unexplainable, quick brilliance of line from a poet who has toiled up to that moment in the stony fields of the trite and the dull.

Naturally, you can't treat the writing of poetry as if it were a course, say, in history, where a student can gather facts and attitudes and offer a paper which is essentially "true" as far as the opinions of historians go. A poem is not a study of a problem, but a strange melting together of sound in the ear, of conception in the mind, of impulse in the nervous system, of old actions mired in the memory. The most the teacher can do is to probe the body of the poem for lesions that corrupt the working of phrase, image, rhythm, tone, theme--to verify, with his limited power, whether the poem is "true" to itself. And with his objective eyes he can find a weakness of word a day, a month, or years earlier than the poet himself might find it. Here is the teacher's usefulness--to find the good in a poem, however slight it may be, and to urge the young poet to thrust his verse in that direction (as much as this can be done consciously; but holding it in the mind will surely affect the unconscious shapers of language in the deep part of the mind). His usefulness is also to slash at the awkwardness, the unoriginal word or attitude, the sentimental, the flat; in brief, to heighten the poet's own awareness of his virtues and faults, to give him the alertness to affect wisely that portion of the writing of poetry which is available to the mind at work.

How to do this? Not, at Iowa, by assignments; not an isolating of rhythm, as such, but always the writing of a complete poem, for rhythm is never divisible from the matter it mimics. Any figure of speech, any adjective, any irony, is conditioned by the total intent of the poem, and is to be considered always in relation to that. Student poems are mimeographed the previous week so that every student may read them in advance of class. The poems are anonymous with the hope of avoiding reluctance to criticize and embarrassment of the poet himself. (But often in the heat of the controversy the poet gives himself away, and joins the debate on his own work, with results both hopeful and hilarious.) By immersion in a continuing flow of concern for improving his own poems and those of his fellows, the whole creating mind of each separate poet may be, however slightly, displaced toward a finer art.

At Iowa we do not believe in writing course by itself, but consider a close, analytical reading of literature, old and modern, as a solid help to the beginning writer. There are courses for this purpose tied in with the writing program, but in addition poems are often taken apart in the writing class, usually because a student's poem offers similar situations of intent or language and the established poem will help him see his own quality, or his lack of it.

But ideas of "classroom" and of "teaching" do not belong in this sort of thing. It is as personal as face to face. The fact that at the University of Iowa a student may submit groups of poems or short stories instead of the usual piece of research as thesis for any advanced degree, and that there is a degree particularly designed for the creative writer (the Master of Fine Arts), means that there must be some formal arrangement of hours and credits. But the effective work is informal, poet to poet, face to face.

I should like to add that any program of creative work in writing at the University of Iowa is made possible only by the good will of Department Head and administration, in itself a significant (or shocking) development in education. I am still astonished to find a University disposed to look at a poet as an honest man, and as quick to give a fellowship to him as to a student wanting to study the mating of opossums (do they hang from high branches in midair?), the reading habits of Republican voters (is there a habit?), or the violent rages of the atom when properly tickled (the poet is an exploder and a rager too).

There are poets here who were writing sentimental trash a short time ago. They are suddenly, sharply better. This is the hope and purpose of a poetry worship. But there are still flabby lines and stanzas. We must tighten them tomorrow.

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A Writer is a Teacher is a Writer

A new thing in the history of literature is happening in the U. S. Writers are everywhere in the universities, creating their own books and helping young talents create theirs. But many people suspect all this activity. Is it possible that the air of the campus is like a poisonous gas—one whiff is tolerable, but prolonged breathing can kill?

Dylan Thomas complained that so many American poets were at universities. Yet in a letter to Oscar Williams, reprinted in *New World Writing* #7, he said grimly, "As always, I need money in a terrible hurry." And in another he asks the age-old writer's question, "How could I earn a living? I can read aloud, through sonorous asthma, with pomp; I can lecture * * *." And he wonders about the university appointment. The answer to his question, as to why American poets are at universities, is one of the most eloquent four-letter words in the English language which Thomas used so beautifully—cash.

The distinguished British critic V. S. Pritchett argued in *The New York Times Book Review* last year against writers at universities, saying that they dry up "not from lack of 'inspiration' but from loss of the habit of writing." But the habit of eating is another one writers are reluctant to give up for long. It is interesting that Mr. Pritchett also accepted the invitation of an American university to breathe its dangerous air, perhaps even for pay.

Does the university kill? Here are a few books by university writers: "Brother to Dragons," by Robert Penn Warren, "The Disguises of Love," by Robie Macauley, "Beyond the Hundredth Meridian," by Wallace Stegner, "Songs for Eve," By Archibald MacLeish, "The Widows of Thornton," by Peter Taylor, "The Wars of Love," by Mark Schorer. These are brilliant books, a sampling only of dozens written in American universities lately. No such production of nonscholarly books can be found at any universities in any other country.

What is happening is this: Without pretending that you can grow hair on a billiard ball, many teaching writers believe that you can certainly help talent grow more luxuriantly when it is present. The great books of the past are, after all, not abstractions called literature, but pieces of writing committed to a page by living men in the fury of their imaginations. In this sense, the presence of writers many actually warm the study of literary texts in the university's minor-ivy and super-market community.

The writers themselves have a steady income, a reckless change when the annual income from writing is usually less than a mill-hand's salary. With a small income, the writer is freed from the compulsion of the market. He can write what he wishes, without that need for

grinding hackwork which has ground the faces of so many writers for centuries. Why should the writer alone among artists not teach, when surely most musicians and painters have taken students?

There is always, of course, the problem of time. Any regular job fritters a writer's day, and especially teaching, where he deals with the most exciting and rewarding material in the world--young men and women of talent. Yet there is always the imposing example of Robert Frost, still writing poetry after nearly forty years of association with colleges. Mr. Frost has apparently not been destroyed. But then, he is, quite simply, indestructible. And with the burden of teaching, Archibald MacLeish at Harvard goes on writing his poems of lovely lyrical motion. In defiance of that attrition of talent which teaching is supposed to bring, John Crowe Ransom at Kenyon College and Allen Tate at Minnesota produce poetry which is a sturdy richness in our culture.

There is another danger, Mr. Pritchett remarks that universities may give writers "an unnatural hostility to vulgarity." The sequence of school-college-college teacher certainly may shut a young writer away from the vigor of life around him. But not nearly as much as such a sequence would in England with its more aloof social structure. (Yet in the Thirties in England I found W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice and Cecil Day Lewis teaching at schools; they are still writing today.) Few young Americans have lives remote from daily experience. There is no doubt that literature could not exist apart from the grit of common life. But read "All the King's Men," that ecstatically coarse novel by Robert Penn Warren, or "The Adventures of Augie March," that vision of vulgarity, by Saul Bellow. The evidence is that once American writers have vulgarity, they will keep it, or throw it in the faces of their readers.

Just as genuine talent has survived the hazards of the big, naughty world, so will it survive the gentler corruptions of the university. A small talent may find that dozing in an academic hammock is more soothing than the ordeal of reading his students by day and driving himself to his own books by night. But there is more in the university atmosphere than the poison of poppy. Today, universities actually want writers. The old tradition of the patron is gone; the university has become patron, more independent than the state, more stable than the individual. Poor old Haydn had one of the more congenial posts with the Esterhazys, but he had to wear a uniform and sit at the foot of the servants' table, in a castle whose idea of gaiety was to display an easy chair which, when sat upon, played a flute solo.

The universities in America are leading our huge upsurge in the creative arts. Unlike European universities, ours have excellent theatres (Oxford still has none), flourishing departments of painting,

music, sculpture. This is a new idea in education. The emphasis is on creating the arts as well as on studying them historically. At the University of Iowa a talented student may submit for an undergraduate major, or for any advanced degree including the Ph.D., a book of poems, a novel, a symphony, a group of paintings or sculpture, a play. The creative imagination that produced the art of the past is not an astonishing explosion that happened once and disintegrated. It is alive today in the young men and women of this country. It is the university's privilege as well as its obligation to honor it.

As an example of how the encouraging of the student writer works in practice, students at Iowa in the last three years have published seven novels, as well as stories and poems regularly in such magazines as *The Kenyon Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Mademoiselle*, *Hudson Review*, *Yale Review*, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, *New World Writing*, *Discovery*, *Esquire*, *The Western Review*. This zeal for writing has even attracted the Orient: A Japanese poet whose first poems in English will appear in *Poetry* (he will also be guest editor of a special issue of *Poetry* on modern Japanese verse in translation), a Korean boy whose first story in English will be printed in *Harper's Bazaar*, and a young woman from India writing about a young girl married and widowed before ever living with her child-groom.

All this makes for a different university climate. Certain teachers come, and many students stay, who would otherwise never be found on a campus, because the university is now hospitable to talent. Of course there is a danger that the young writer may wither away into criticism alone, but criticism is a natural part of any writing. The right kind of encouragement with sharpness is required. As Wallace Stegner has said, "all we try to do is provide some sort of growing weather and not pull the plants up too often to see how the roots are coming."

There is a tremendous urgency toward the creative in the young minds of this country. Our universities would be derelict if they did not help. They can do so because of the flexible ways of American society and our odd but useful elective system of college courses.

This country once had Concord on the edge of Cambridge. Now we hope for a dozen Concords jewelizing the live throat of the continent from Massachusetts to Iowa to California.

--*The New York Times Book Review*, July 17, 1955

The Writer and the Place

Paul Engle

It was a vision.

By vision, I do not mean the abrupt and ecstatic experience of Saul on the road to Damascus, blinded by a light "above the brightness of the sun," and startled by a voice speaking from heaven.

By vision, I mean the steady development at the University of Iowa of the conviction that the creative imagination in all of the arts is as important, as congenial, and as necessary, as the historical study of all the arts. How simple, and yet how reckless.

This gradual revelation was quite as astonishing as a sudden idea seen, for the first time, in a flash of light. It took imagination, some years ago, for an educational institution to put its trust in the imaginative arts.

Universities are not famous for taking chances, but the University of Iowa took one. There were doubts at the start. Could the writer keep his native frenzy in an academic air? Would not the place be overrun with aesthetes who come not to work but to dabble their delicate fingers in Iowa River, which flows through the campus? (The answer to this was an easy "No!" for the River is frozen hard all winter and it is too muddy all summer, although with the finest mud in the world.) Would there not be fire, violence in the streets, and, most criminal of all, loafing in the classroom? If you gave young writers enough rope, would they hang decency and honor instead of, as might be hoped, hanging each other?

The French novelist Gustave Flaubert said, "The sight of a nude woman makes me think of her skeleton." Similarly, the University looked beyond the superficial image of these doubts and thought of the solid talent beneath, although perhaps not with Flaubert's analytical enthusiasm. By doing so, it recognized a powerful new direction in this country's culture, the writer everywhere on the campus, the older as teacher, the younger as student. For the first time in the sad and enchanting history of literature, for the first time in the glorious and dreadful history of the world, the writer was welcome in the academic place. If the mind could be honored there, why not the imagination?

One can understand why European universities would find this distasteful, with their ancient and rigid structures, although young writers are increasingly found at English institutions today. It was the flexibility of the American university, with its effort to roam over all areas of human activity, which made possible, if not easy, the addition of the creative person to the campus. If it is proper to teach children

chicken-sexing, which calls for extreme acuteness of eye, and weaving, which can be a matter of the most gracious taste in design, then why is it not appropriate to teach originality in writing? To say that the creative has no part in education is to argue that a university should not be universal.

There is still a question to be asked--however pleasant this may sound, will it really work in practice? Here are a few facts from the University of Iowa in the last couple of years. I would rather not resort to this sort of obvious cataloguing of successes, but they are unassailable facts proving objectively that the university today is an honest and helpful place for the writer to be.

When President Lincoln was ill one time he said, "Now let the office-seekers come, for at last I have something I can give them all." The writing program at the University of Iowa, more modest and less infectious than the President, does not offer something to all seekers. We believe that you can only teach where something in a mind is waiting to be taught. We do not pretend to grow blonde curls on an autumn pumpkin (alas, for what a triumph that would be in a farm state; when this happens, Iowa will be first). When Shelley wrote Keats, after reading some of his early and unrestrained poetry, that he should load every rift with ore, he was engaged in the sort of teaching we try to do; that is, he was identifying talent, and then saying what he could to make it better. Indeed, if Shelley turned up at the University of Iowa today, as English poets now do, his talent would be recognized and encouraged, and it is inconceivable that he would be thrown out as he was at Oxford. Maxwell Perkins editing the massive manuscripts of Thomas Wolfe into presentable shape is the sort of teaching we believe can be done.

After all, has the painter not always gone to an art school, or at least to an established master, for instruction? And the composer, the sculptor, the architect? Then why not the writer? Good poets, like good hybrid corn, are both born and made. Right criticism can speed up the maturing of a poet by years. More than that, tough and detailed criticism of a young writer can help him become his own shrewd critic so that, when he publishes, the critics will not have to be tough on him. In the process of original writing, every word and every attitude is subject to a constant scrutiny, or should be, and much of what we do is to heighten the sense of awareness which this requires. We knock, or persuade, or terrify, the false tenderness toward his own work out of the beginning writer. This is the beginning of wisdom.

As so often, Flaubert has said it wisely, "Beware of that intellectual overheating called inspiration," he wrote, and this is our warning too. Learn that it is not the intensity of emotion in the writer that matters, but the intensity of the shaped language (to paraphrase

T.S.Eliot). Unless the writer keeps his aesthetic distance from the object he is creating, it may well overwhelm him in an excess of self-commitment. Flaubert said it: "You can depict wine, love, and women on the condition that you are not a drunkard, a lover, or a husband. If you are involved in life, you see it badly; your sight is affected either by suffering or enjoyment." This is not to argue for coldness in the writer, but only for that minimum level of calmness without which the work will not have the control necessary to achieve form, without which the moving cry becomes only screaming.

Flaubert knew the emotional risks of the writer, and only urged an objective stare at the subjective scene because he was so greatly in danger of drowning in his own subjectivity. "When I was describing the poisoning of Emma Bovary," he commented, "I had such a taste of arsenic in my mouth and was poisoned so effectively myself, that I had two attacks, for I vomited my entire dinner." What young writer could be harmed by discovering such an example? He is more likely to be harmed by looking at writing as the spontaneous outpouring of immediate feeling, like a patient on the psychiatrist's couch, the sodium amytal in his blood dissolving his inhibitions. The typewriter seems to act as the hypodermic syringe, releasing his babble of language. This writing then goes to the printer unrevised, lively perhaps, with the immediacy of its memories, but turgid in its unshaped prose. This delusion, that writing is not a formed art, but that it falls naturally onto the page like sudden rain, we try to persuade out of any heads which have it thundering and raging inside.

In a country with so ranging a landscape, with its concentration of culture so widely diffused, the problem of where a young writer is to feel at home becomes far more urgent than in England, where London is in easy reach. There must be an alternative between Hollywood and New York, between those places psychically as well as geographically. The University of Iowa tries to offer such a community, congenial to the young writer, with his uneasiness about writing as an honorable career, or with his excess of ego about calling himself a writer. To them, we offer hard criticism and decent sympathy. More than that, our way of mimeographing poetry and fiction for the Workshops offers everyone a hearing. To have your work read by all the members of the Workshop, and publicly criticized and praised by your instructors in the weekly meetings, represents a helpful and at the same time less hazardous form of publication.

The system offers proof that writing can be seriously regarded, and that it is a difficult art not only worth an absolute commitment of faith, time and energy, but demanding it. The writer finds that the students around him are alert to his faults and quick to praise his virtues. In brief, he is, while practicing a completely private art,

reassured by a sense of belonging to a group which gives him decent regard. For as long as he is part of this community, he has a useful competition with those around him, and at the same time is freed from the imperatives of the market place, as he may never be again. He can have a manner of publication without losing too much blood.

This matter of place is of tremendous importance to the writer in the U.S.A. We do not have that intense concentration of talent in one city, as certainly exists in Paris, London and Rome, where writers either know each other or know a good deal about each other. Our plans give the writer a place where he can be himself, confronting the hazards and hopes of his own talent, and at the same time he can measure his capacity against a variety of others, some better, some worse. He grows up rapidly. He becomes his own self-critic. He discovers that learning to write is not a mere acquiring of "techniques," as if he were learning to be a laboratory assistant or an appliance repairman, but in part a learning of his own nature. The criticism of a manuscript may be directed less to the prose than to the personality who wrote it. Sometime the young writer must understand that writing is a hard and solitary occupation, accomplished only by the old and bitter way of sitting down in fear and trembling to confront the most terrifying thing in the world—a blank sheet of paper. It is heartening to be able to do this in a place where you know that others are facing the same ordeal.

Place does not mean simply the boundaries of the United States. We have found that the creative imagination is wonderfully alert in breaking down the barriers of nationality and language. The Workshops have heard the voices of poets and fiction writers speaking English (and writing it) in a charming and original way, which varied according to whether the speakers were from Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines, the Ireland, England, Canada, Sweden, India. A former officer in the Imperial Japanese Navy has heard his poems on the fall of Japan criticized by a former yeoman in the American Navy. A girl from India, looking as if she had stepped down from her usual job of holding up the corner of a temple roof just to attend this class for an hour, has heard with shock the story of an American boy's anxieties and bafflement in his relationship with women. "But why all of this fuss about sex?" she asked in a voice British in enunciation but gently, beautifully songlike.

The man who wrote the story, a former Marine sergeant with shoulders which looked as if they could have held up the temple alone, glared at her and demanded with a luminous suspicion, "OK, so what's wrong with sex?"

"On, nothing," she replied, dropping the words into the air as if they were carved in stone, "but why do so much worrying about it? We settled all of that thousands of years ago."

For a moment all discussion stopped while the calm-out-of-violence of ancient India hung in the troubled atmosphere of a hot August afternoon in a modest-sized Iowa town just about to become one hundred years old.

The strength of this international quality in the Workshops is an example to us all of the power which the creative impetus has. Kim Yong Ik, probably the leading South Korean fiction writer in English, describes his widowed mother diving far down in the freezing waters of a Korean island to gather edible plants to feed her family. The place is strange to us, the customs are stranger, the language spoken by the family is strangest of all. Yet in a plain room in Iowa City, with the closest salt water over one thousand miles away, in the presence of young writers from the red earth hills of Georgia, the green counties of the English Midlands, the brown width of Texas, the granite-gouged valleys of New Hampshire, the deep Minnesota woods, the shallow Louisiana swamps, the California coast sun-brilliant below Los Angeles, the northern fog of Dublin and the southern jungle of Negros Island in the Philippines, the story of that diving woman and her family was as close as the air they breathed. Reason: it was told with imagination.

For such a community, home is not the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in, as the Frost poem accurately says of its people. Home is the one place where the creative energy find that, once it has come there, they are glad to take it in. The benefit to the whole United States of giving these articulate people from the far islands and continents of the earth a conviction that this country cherishes their talent (as their own countries often do not) is beyond measuring. For those seeking a true image of America, it is lucky that they come not to a seacoast city but to an interior town in the midst of the fat land that feeds the nation. Here they have a direct look at the daily life of the U.S.A. in its most typical manner.

Of course there are those in the academic life of the U.S.A. who either suspect us, deplore us, or hate us. In certain cases, we are proud to have them as enemies. In other cases, we regret the misunderstandings spoken about our beliefs or intentions. Let us be definite about this. There seems to us no reason for hostility between the study of literature and its creation. There are those who feel that writing is better done by the inspired ignoramus, uncorrupted by the weakening influences of the university. To us, it makes no difference what grows on the wall outside the writers house, whether it is English ivy, poison ivy, hops, morning glories or gourd vines. F. Scott Fitzgerald

said once that there are no second chapters in American lives. Too often there are no second books, or at least there are second books no better (often worse) than the first. We think that the critical study of past literature will give the writer a maturity and an awareness of all the infinite variety of forms and attitudes, and that this will give bone and tendon to the soft flesh of his feelings.

A very important help here is that scholarship has never been so congenial to the writers as today. In much of their work, many scholars make literary insights which sometimes equal in perception the insights contained in the text they are studying. There has been a good deal of criticism today which surpasses in imaginative texture some of what is taken for literature.

It would be folly to deny that there are often reasons for hostility. Never in the world's cultural history has the study of literature been so minutely organized into Departments of English, with numbered courses and named degrees. How can this immense apparatus really find enough fresh material to equal its massive arrangements? Will there not be several scholars converging through the tall grass of the library's meadow, all aiming for the one poor little rabbit-fact? New interpretations there will always be, but as of now the scholarly pattern is set up as if there really would be a place for the textual scholar as there had been in the past, when we needed a definitive text of Shakespeare and Chaucer. Here is where the writer becomes useful. Why should he not be a small, indeed a very small, part of this academic intelligence. But it has its value, wanting to teach the writers of the past from the writer's point of view, as imaginative expressions of his agony and delight, rather than as historical instances. If the creative writer is a menace to scholarship, then take a cold look at what that scholarship truly is. All too often it lacks the substance and power, not to mention the decent prose, of even minor writing.

We do not pretend to have produced writers in the Workshop. Their talent was inevitably shaped by the genes rattling in the ancestral closets. We did give them a community in which to try out the quality of their gift, as New Englanders used to speak of trying out the oil from whale blubber. Much of this writing was done in Iowa City and received our criticism. Some of it was written far away. In either case, the writer was for a while part of the community we have made here where the University has stood in the position of friend and, to a lighter degree than we would wish, of patron. It is conceivable that by the end of the twentieth century the American university will have proved a more understanding and helpful aid to literature than ever the old families of Europe. That sort of patronage had its doubtful aspects too. Franz Joseph Haydn, radiant in his talent, was counted in the lower ranks of

the domestics by the great Esterhazy family of Hungary. He wore a blue uniform and ate down at the end of the table. He composed much of his sunlit music while living with that family, whose idea of fun was to have in the music room a big chair which, when sat in, played a cheerful flute solo.

We believe in the solitary genius, not in the agreeable average. Art may turn out to be the last refuge of the individual in our time. The one man raging in his terrible talent may be worth more than the sum of one hundred thousand bland mediocrities. When Flaubert wrote the word "hysterics," he says that he was so swept away, was bellowing so loudly and feeling so deeply what his little Bovary was going through, that he was afraid of having hysterics himself. This is seldom, I would guess, the way of scholarship. The bellowing of scholars I have been happy enough to observe was not out of sympathy with the characters they were studying. Such conduct indicates a different disposition in the sort of people coming to a writing program. To our delight and astonishment, they can adapt, they can be at home, they can find a heartening help.

Of course there are risks. The mild frost of a university air can kill the tender plant. Excess of self-consciousness can slow down a talent which has little momentum. An English novelist, V.S. Pritchett, laments that the American university may induce "an unnatural hostility to vulgarity" in the writer. I have seen twenty-five years of American writers at a university. Have no fear. They will not lose their vulgarity.

For some, the university will never be the right place, and this is right. They should remain on the road or on the beach or up in the attic or down in the cellar. It's a big country, mister. There's a place for everybody, in or out of the university, in or out of the house, in or out of jail.

The curious extraordinary devices which made this writing program possible in a state university are a part of the lavish variety of the American way of doing everything, including education and literature. It is proper, then, to express our thanks to a country which has given freedom of voice to its own young talent, and to that of many other nations. We have been allowed to run, stumble and jump over the lovely landscape of the imagination. How can writers praise a country more than by saying: Look! In this place we have been free.

--The Introduction to MIDLAND edited by Paul Engle,
Random House, 1961

The Program in Creative Writing

I

The Writer on the American Campus

The spread of writers through our universities and colleges is an American phenomenon, rising naturally out of the flexibility of our educational system. It also comes in part from our traditional inventiveness, our feeling as a society that any human activity can be looked at, studied, and enhanced.

In the nineteenth century there had been occasional poets on the faculties of academic institutions, but they were there not as writers but as regular teachers. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was invited to Harvard not as a poet, but as Head of Modern Languages. The quickness of the changed today is represented by the most distinguished Chair at Harvard University, the Boylston Professorship of Rhetoric. For a long time this was filled by a rhetorician. It is now occupied by the poet, playwright, Pulitzer Prize winner, Archibald MacLeish, who holds no advanced academic degree at all. John Harvard would have fainted at the prospect.

Even at Oxford University, where the Professor of Poetry, an annual appointment, had for many years, if not centuries, been a scholar of poetry, the recent appointments have gone to genuine poets, such as Cecil Day Lewis and W.H. Auden.

If the poets associated with American universities were to be removed from our literary life, there would be little art of poetry left. This is true of no other country, although it would be moderately true of England.

That sturdy individual, Robert Frost, wittily skeptical of academic life, has been connected with colleges for nearly all of his adult writing life: a teaching institute at Derry, New Hampshire, Amherst, the University of Michigan, Dartmouth; in the winter he lives near Harvard University, of which he is an overseer, and in the summer, near the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, where he speaks on poetry as a permanent member of the staff. He has also lectured at an enormous number of colleges in this country, and is the only American writer to receive honorary degrees from Oxford and Cambridge Universities in the same year. None of this constant exposure to academic air seems to have corrupted his art.

Two of the most prominent examples of the writer on the campus are Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate. Mr. Warren is currently teaching at Yale University and Mr. Tate at the University of

Minnesota. Between them, they have taught at such a variety of places as Vanderbilt, Louisiana State, California, Iowa and Princeton. Both are contributors of permanent poems and books of fiction to American Literature. Although from the beginning of their careers they have been associated with universities, their work has steadily grown in dramatic power, in emotional intensity and in intellectual structure. In addition, they have strongly affected many students, among them some of our best young writers.

In order to suggest the extent to which writers have permeated the American campus, here is a very incomplete listing, with prizes in parentheses:

Theodore Roethke (Pulitzer), University of Washington; W.D. Snodgrass (Pulitzer), University of Iowa, Wayne State University; Richard Wilbur (Pulitzer), Wellesley College, Harvard, and Wesleyan University; Robert Hillyer (Pulitzer), Harvard and University of Delaware; Karl Shapiro (Pulitzer), University of Nebraska, Randall Jarrell (National Book Award), Woman's College of North Carolina; Bernard Malamud (National Book Award), Oregon State and Bennington; Robert Lowell (Pulitzer), University Iowa and Boston University; Philip Roth (National Book Award), University of Iowa; Donald Hall (Lamont Award), University of Michigan; Mark Van Doren (Pulitzer), Columbia University; Ralph Ellison (National Book Award), Bard College, University of Chicago; Saul Bellow (National Book Award), University of Minnesota; Philip Booth (Lamont Award), Wellesley College; Donald Justice (Lamont Award), University of Iowa; Robert Mezey (Lamont Award), University of Iowa; Stanley Kunitz (Pulitzer), New School, N.Y.; William Dickey (Yale Series of Younger Poets), University of Iowa and Denison University; Edward Weismiller (Yale Series of Younger Poets), Pomona College; Dan Hoffman (Yale Series of Younger Poets), Swarthmore College; Louis Simpson, University of California; Earle Birney, University of British Columbia; James B. Hall, Universities of Iowa and Oregon; Brewster Ghiselin, University of Utah; Andrew Lytle, University of Florida; R.P.Blackmur, Princeton University; Richard Eberhardt, Dartmouth College; Walker Gibson (Yale Series of Younger Poets), University of Iowa and New York University; John Holms, Tufts University; William Stafford, Lewis and Clark College; David Wagoner, University of Washington; John F. Nims, Notre Dame; Reed Whittemore, Carleton College; Howard Nemerov, Bennington College; Rolfe Humphries, Amherst College.

There are many more.

II

The Writer in the Writers Workshop

The University of Iowa was the first institution to bring to its campus the established writer as permanent teacher, and the aspiring writer as student. It was the first university to offer a complete set of courses in writing as a part of its regular offerings, and the first to allow "creative" work in poetry, fiction and the play to be submitted as a thesis for all advanced degrees. It was the first to prove that the imagination of the artist, in all of the arts, could flourish on a campus.

The writers who came to teach continued to produce their own books. The students who came to discover their talent (or their lack of it; this happens) wrote their first poems, stories and books under closer criticism. Some 70 novels written by student in Iowa City have been published and several dozen volumes of poetry.

The students found that they matured their talents more rapidly under criticism. As a result, they have published in the principal literary magazines in English, often many times: *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Kenyon Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Hudson Review*, *Paris Review*, *Esquire*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Mademoiselle*, *Texas Quarterly*, *Botteghe Oscure*, *Poetry* (Chicago), *Accent*, *Story*, *Contact*, *Carleton Miscellany*, and numerous "little" magazines. *Poetry* (Chicago) is the professional Journal for poets. For many years hardly an issue has appeared without at least one University of Iowa poet, and usually several. It is unlikely that this record is equaled by the publication of scholarly material in a professional journal by the students, or even the faculty, of any university.

In May, 1961, Random House published the anthology MIDLAND, over 600 pages of poetry and fiction written by people who had been students in the writing program at the University of Iowa.

III

How the Iowa Writing Program Works

This is how the writing program at the University of Iowa operates.

We try to keep as high a "professional" standard as possible. We are not interested in saying of a poem that it is quite good "for a student poem." Our students compete in the open literary market and publish alongside the established writers. On the other hand, our concern is not with the person who has proved his talent, but with the discovery of talent.

Every student wishing to attend the program is required to submit examples of his work in advance of coming. In no case may a student register for a course in writing without the consent of the writing staff. This keeps out the mediocre, and avoids that depressing need for dealing with the incompetent which is found in colleges where no such requirement exists.

Every member of the writing staff (there are two poets and three fiction writers, who are full time, plus several teaching graduate assistants) is himself a practicing and publishing writer.

Once the student is on campus and a member of the program, a further selection takes place as the staff watches his development, or his lack of it. In most instances of failure to improve, the students themselves sense their failure and voluntarily leave after a semester or two. In some cases, the staff suggests that their chance of success seems dim, and urges them to leave.

It requires dedication of an almost fanatic degree to become a writer (or, indeed, to become any sort of artist). It requires in addition, a discipline of a very harsh sort. It is common in a university to speak of the several "disciplines." There is no discipline as intense as that required for a man to confront his empty sheet of paper and fill it entirely out of the inventions of his own mind. The writer has no apparatus of scholarship or elaborate laboratory equipment to help. He is the solitary. We have found that the authentic talent always has this sort of discipline. It is almost a matter of will power, the resolution to work without which all talent fails. Only students of that nature interests us. We do not want the genteel literary mind which can turn out a modestly finished poem. The important point here is that this sort of disciplined fervor can exist on a campus.

Nor do we feel that the "creative" mind is limited to the arts. Certainly science itself has progressed because there were minds of powerful originality which could use technical resources for new ends. At the ultimate limits of mathematics, of symbolic logic, of physics, of poetry and music, surely there is a high degree of imaginativeness common to all.

Because real talent is never abundant, our students come from all regions of the United States, and, in fact from many parts of the world. At present, there are 157 registered in all the writing classes. The majority of these are graduate students. This is in part because talent needs a while to develop, and by the time a writer has gone through four years of college he will generally have produced some evidence of his gift. This is also in part because in any thousand undergraduates, there will be very little creative talent, so that we must be able to choose from a very large number. One favorable result is that there is less risk involved of our making a mistake. As a

matter of past experience, we can say that our joint estimates of talent, taken by the entire staff, are correct in the vast majority of cases.

IV

The Foreign Student in the Iowa Program

One of the most rewarding and fascinating aspects of the program has been the constant presence of foreign students, who write both in their native language and in English, some of them extraordinarily well in English. We have had students from other countries who published in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and others, and some have published books.

Such writers have come from Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, The Philippines, India, England, Ireland, Canada. They had added excitement and variety to the workshops and have gone back to their own countries with a deep and grateful regard for the United States. They have often found that in the writing program at this University they were given a higher and more sympathetic recognition as writers than in their own countries.

It is very important to emphasize that, when you affect a writer, you may be affecting also a potential audience of great size. The "image" of America which the articulate writer takes back with him is potentially more expressive than the image taken back by a scientist, who is less likely to publish his views of this country widely. There is a true international quality of the imagination, making it possible for our foreign students to lead a congenial life with our own native-born students.

V

The Problem Facing the Iowa Program

We are not a program which feels that has a sensible and workable idea if only a little support could be found for it. Nor are we like a football team which screams for help because it has had a long losing season.

Our problem is the opposite: the idea has worked so well that it has outrun the resources of the University of Iowa, in terms of the requisite funds to bring here all of the talented writers who wish to come.

This University has been helpful and generous beyond any other institution. Here the writer is central. Many other colleges and

universities have a writer or two on the staff, and some writing students, but in most cases they are on the edge of the Department and not integral to it. The Graduate College has given the program a wholly disproportionate amount of help. This is concrete evidence that some very sensible people close to the daily workings of the programs (our Graduate Deans lately have all been scientists) have taken a hard look at what was being done, and have expressed their faith in the most specific of all ways--by giving money from their relatively restricted budgets. But the Graduate College cannot increase the number of fellowships given to the program without unjustly interfering with allocations to other Departments.

At the same time, we have more applicants, from many more places, than ever before. Each year a substantial quantity of young writers is unable to join the program because we cannot find even a small amount of financial assistance. This is especially true of the foreign students, for whom travel itself is a grave problem. At the moment, we have letters from young writers in Pakistan, India, Japan, Turkey, England, South Korea, all wanting to come.

Given adequate financial help over a period of years, there is little doubt that there would come to Iowa City a substantial portion of the young talent of this country and of many others. We have been asked to recommend two of our writing graduates to go to two universities in Nigeria, to begin writing programs there. The intention is to help start a native literature, in English, as rapidly as possible, and the Iowa plan seems the surest way of doing this. It is perfectly possible that the literary imagination of a good deal of the world could be greatly affected by an Iowa experience.

One reason for so considerable need for funds is that our best students are largely graduates, older people who in many cases have acquired responsibilities and cannot simply give them up to come and be students again. This is a common pattern in American education, and especially abundant among the writers we get, people who have written enough to prove their talent.

VI

What Has Been Done to Solve The Problem

It might be asked, if what we say about the flourishing state of the writing program is true, why we have not long ago looked for outside help to supplement the aid received from inside the University? This has happened.

The relationship between this program and the practical world of business around it is remarkably close and congenial. A fund has

been established to which various firms and individuals have contributed. One of the dominant themes in twentieth century literature has been the "alienation" of the artist from the life of his own times. (This is especially prominent in James Joyce). The last portion of the Introduction to MIDLAND discusses this in more detail. A refutation of the alienation of the writer from his area may be found in a partial list of the firms which have given money for fellowships. The executives of these companies have looked at the writing program and have found it sensible enough, and useful enough, to justify help. These are not people who throw company money around carelessly. Here are some:

Collins Radio Co. (Cedar Rapids), which makes much of the electronics equipment in United States military and commercial planes, and have devised the two-way communication system for the American "Mercury" space capsule; Quaker Oats, Cedar Rapids, which feeds our children; Fisher Governor, Marshalltown, which makes automatic control valves for fluids and contributes to the atomic submarines; Iowa Manufacturing, Cedar Rapids, which makes portable rock crushers; Amana Refrigeration, inventor of the upright deep freeze; Maytag Company, Newton, one of the principal manufacturers of washing machines; Natural Gas Company, Omaha; WMT Radio and TV, CBS, Cedar Rapids; Merchant's National Bank, Cedar Rapids; Iowa Electric Light and Power, Cedar Rapids; Iowa Power and Light, Des Moines; *Des Moines Register*; *The Reader's Digest*; *Esquire*.

The writing program, like these companies, has a product. In our case, it is the finished manuscript or book. It is very heartening to have such support. But these are large gifts given once, and they are not large. Nevertheless, here is a phenomenon, business supporting the imagination, of a very unique support. It suggests that the program has made every possible effort to find all available assistance.

VII

The Need

With adequate support, this program could become the literary centre for youthful talent from the United States and from many other countries. To realize this, it is necessary to have a predictable amount of money over a definite number of years, both the time and the amount to be known well in advance. It is especially important to have funds not a part of the University's budget. This is true because University fellowships are awarded in March each year, but we need to have money which can be committed to talent whenever it appears.

Foreign students particularly have to make very long-range plans; they also need large sums.

A substantial, annual, predictable allocation of non-tax money is needed. Given that, we could, with our experience in testing talent, all but promise a steady production of valuable examples of writing.

It is important to emphasize the difference between writing and the other arts. All that the writer needs is a piece of paper or a battered typewriter and he is in business. The painter and sculptor need their studios, their materials, often very expensive, their models, and their museums and galleries. The theatre requires costly buildings, stages, costumes. Music needs an imposing variety of instruments, concert halls, equipment such as tape recorders and LP records. Some of these also need paid conductors, directors or actors.

The writer is the cheapest artist of all. Every cent given the writing program at the University of Iowa goes to a human being. Nothing goes to administration, materials, equipment. The money is converted directly into talent and thence into the written work.

It is our conviction that there is great merit in conducting this activity here in the upper Midwest. Without narrow regional pride, it can be argued that it is useful to offer an alternative between New York and Hollywood. The American writer, coming here, often sees another part of his own country, and the foreign writer sees an area less well known to him than the East and West Coasts. In turn, it enriches the Midwest to have a center of writers added to its steadily increasing number of theatres, galleries and museums.

In order to achieve this, we must have sufficient funds, over a long period of time, to allow us to make plans for finding talent, and for committing money to talented people far enough in advance so that they in turn can make their plans to come. We can offer them sympathetic but honest criticism, a chance to live in a community which has none of the preciousness associated often with art colonies, and an association with writers from many parts of the USA and the world. We can materially alter the prejudices of foreign writers against this country (I can cite ample evidence of this), and send them back enthusiastic supporters of our ways.

The writing effort here should be regarded not as an "Iowa" matter, but as a part of the maturing literary culture of the entire country. It should also be viewed as a portion of the immense aid we are giving to other countries. In this case, it is help for their own developing literatures.

---Iowa City, 1959

A Silk Purse From a Pig's Ear

Of course you can't grow curls on a Halloween pumpkin just because it has two glittering eyes and a grinning mouth.

And of course you can't grow a poet out of an imagination-less brain just because it has two thinking lobes and a trickle of bloodstream running through it.

You can only grow something out of dirt if something tentative and poised is there waiting to be grown.

You can only teach where something is waiting to be taught, where a person or a skill is waiting.

There is the old argument that poets are born and not made. To their birth, happily, we can contribute nothing. But to their making we can contribute sometimes a little and sometimes a lot. Once born, we can help them in their making, even though it is largely chance-making and self-making. In sum--the right teacher can teach the right writer enough to help him become more the writer he almost is.

One reason for the contempt many people feel for teaching of writing is that they have a false conception of such teaching. They think of lectures on such separate topics as "dialogue, plot, conflict," and assume that the teacher is trying to give a formula for writing that will be of general use to all kinds of people. The truth is that you can't teach writing that way. It might be said that anyone of a normal memory can learn some dates and repeat them to a class. But the teaching of writing is not impersonal, just as writing is not. Because so much of the personal quality of the writer goes into his writing, so must the personal quality of the teacher go into his teaching of writing. The teaching varies, as the writing does, according to the character and disposition of the person doing it. For that reason alone, teaching writing means teaching different kinds of things.

After all, what American writer has not had some teaching given to him? Not in a college, perhaps, but in some similar way, he was instructed. The editing that Maxwell Perkins did on the vast manuscripts of Thomas Wolfe is an example of exactly the kind of thing your genuine teacher of writing does: a personal working with the word of the manuscript. I wonder if there is one writer who has not at some time had, from an editor or a friend or a practicing writer, some concrete criticism. This is what the teacher of writing intends: aid at the practical level, not lectures on abstract ideas.

What, then, can teaching of writing teach?

One of the most valuable things a teacher of writing can do is to teach all literature as if it was really what the author intended it to be: writing. Writing, not any kind of history. The close analysis of examples is of as much use to the young writer as any single thing he can do. Take, for one instance, Ernest Hemingway's *The Killers*.

I believe that there is no young writer in this country who would not profit from the kind of teaching which helps him realize the solidity of structure underneath a short story in the way that the analysis of *The Killers* helps him realize the genuine and subtle meaning of that story. The young writer will have his own story-sense refined by such analysis. He will come to his own writing with a greater understanding of the necessity that the action of the story he is writing be not only authentic and alive, but meaningful as well. And such analysis will make him less content with the story which is merely "true to life" in the sense of material set down in order as it happened, and will make him more eager to shape and inform his material until it has a natural meaningfulness. This is the kind of teaching I mean, showing the practicality for writing of reading and study.

Another usefulness of teaching is in the criticism of the actual text as written by the student. Analysis can show the young writer how closely all aspects of a story work together, how incident, as organized and called plot, depends on the meaning intended, and how character equally interworks with theme, and is affected by it originally insofar as it must reveal theme. But when the story is written, it in turn must be analyzed from all these points of view. At the simplest level, take the words used. Are they right in tone? Are they too many or too pretentious? Often enough this latter is true, and the writer must be assured that there are times when the best writing consists in not writing, in letting a bare fact hit the reader harder than any comment or description could. The kind of teaching I mean here is done daily in many courses in writing; it is the kind done by Joseph Conrad in commenting on a story.

Perhaps the most valuable thing teaching can do is to make the writer his own teacher by the act of self-criticism. This is what every writer must come to, and a teacher can help speed up the process by making the young writer aware of what he should criticize in his own work, and of how ruthless he must be. Teaching can offer a student a chance to have his manuscript taken apart and the flaws gently but shamelessly revealed. It can urge the writer to criticize every word and situation and attitude before he commits it to the page, and, after it is once there, question it and doubt it and change it. It can remove any false tenderness of the beginning writer toward his word-child. It can

spare him the humiliation of having some critic do this publicly after he has published. It can alter a student's whole conception of what a story or poem is really trying to do. It can help the writer realize the writing is not a way of releasing one's accumulated fear or desperation or love, but that it is a formal art with its objective shape and needs. This hastening of the process of realizing that literary expression is a thing in itself and not simply self-expression is a portion of the teacher's job. Not that the self is ever absent from writing, but that it must be controlled and given form and intention.

Often the teacher of writing finds that criticism of a manuscript is actually criticism of a person, the flaws being not so much in the handling of language but in the lack of a wide and warm enough sense of experience. The power to make a story is often the power to make a life. By awareness of character and of conduct, by breadth of acceptance of every manner of personality, by perception of real motive beneath surface gloom or gaiety, the writer conditions the amount of "life" which comes to him. The teacher can very slightly make a student conscious of the need for as total an acceptance of experience as possible, and he can make the student a little more willing to see the despair and violence and hope and strength of the daily life around him. The teacher can help the young writer by showing him that writing is not a marvelous account of marvels, but a worked-out expression of a lived-at experience.

Teaching may perform one honest service--it may hasten the maturity of the writer. By pointing out faults, which the writer would probably have realized himself in time, the teacher may save a year or two or three in the young writer's development. That is a fact proved time and again. A student came to me in a state of complete uncertainty. He was writing bad poems about good and unique subjects. I started him writing stories, helped revise his first two five times a piece, got him to realize the need of solid form and of cutting out all that was not immediately relevant, and he at once placed both stories in a magazine of good quality and is now working on a book. Not happily working, for all writing is a misery, but working with self-direction.

Can teaching of writing do harm? Yes. It can encourage the mediocre. It can make a student too dependent on a teacher. But part of the teacher's job is to see this and urge a student to leave him, to go to a state college of agriculture, or New York, or Bad Axe or Wounded Knee.

Above all, teaching can show the student that all writing is in the end a solitary thing, that it consists in sitting down alone at that

torturing table and beating your head and your chest and your dog and your typewriter.

As you do that, maybe you remember something somebody called a teacher of writing said and maybe it tightens your story or makes you throw it away or sends you down to the corner for a beer or keeps you at your problem until the story's meaning opens like a door and you see a brief way into a half-lit room and you've been helped as much as mortal man can help another man. What, after all, do you want from a teacher of writing—William Shakespeare as an attractive young man whistling (and you know what he's whistling at) on the streets of Stratford?

Interview

1. Shaper of Literature

Paul Engle is a poet. At 54, he has spent the bulk of his life in Iowa, and he has made the State University of Iowa one of the best known (and possibly the best) centres for the teaching of creative writing in the United States. The Writers' Workshop which he heads has helped to train Wallace Stegner, W.D. Snodgrass and Donald Justice. It has employed as teacher Robert Penn Warren, Robert Lowell, Philip Roth and Vance Bourjaily.

Engle is at once poet, teacher, administrator and crusader; he has convinced young writers of the worth of Flaubert and Midwestern business men of the worth of young writers. (The State University of Iowa has the only natural Gas Fellowship in the world, underwritten by the Northern Nature Gas Company of Omaha, Nebraska.) He writes 3,000 letters a year to prospective students, former students, and potential patrons. Yet in the quarter century since he returned to Iowa City from three years as a Rhodes scholar, he himself has written a half-dozen books of poetry, a novel, a book of reminiscence, opera libretti and critical articles.

Four times a year, Engle comes to New York--because, he says, "there are certain things one can't do anywhere else." On his most recent visit, he was interviewed for this article by R.W. Apple, Jr., of NBC News, a regular contributor to BOOKS and other periodicals.

Q. Why don't we begin with the cliché: can you teach writing?

A. You can teach writing to someone who has writing talent: we do not pretend to be able to teach writing to anyone. No one is allowed to register for any writing course at the University of Iowa without submitting manuscripts in advance. We read these, and if they are bad, or obviously the work of someone with a meretricious mind, or a dabbler, we simply say, "You can't come." We have to assume that it is possible to read a piece of writing and discover whether the writer has talent or not. This is done every day by critics of books--they read a book and then they write a review of it.

Now, in the other art, there have been schools for thousands of years; the young artist goes and becomes in effect an apprentice. Many people object to us on the ground that it is wrong to do this with a writer. I don't think that is in any way consistent. I think if you can help a young composer or painter

you can help a young writer. Furthermore, the young writer is more vulnerable to help because he has to some degree a greater need for it. That is to say, there are in music certain established things that no one differs about--a fugue is a fugue. Writing is a good deal less technical than that; therefore, it is an infinitely more personal thing; therefore, to teach it, you must affect the person.

Q. Does that mean that you try, for example, to teach a young poet to be more sensitive?

A. So often when you criticize a writer, you're not just criticizing a moment in a poem or a story, you're actually criticizing a man; his perception was inadequate to the scene. So we try to persuade our students of the necessity of developing a much higher awareness of the circumstances of life--the presence of the simple sunlight and the presence of the most complicated human relationships. This is a tricky area, and obviously there is a limit to what you can do, but we try.

Q. What are the mechanics of all this?

A. Every Friday we have mimeographed a group of poems or a short story or a chapter of a novel. The students read it over the weekend. On Monday afternoon it is discussed in the workshop by the students and the staff. In addition, after the student has written a good deal, there are individual conferences, where we go into the total evidence of his work and the direction it is taking. The students are also required to read the literature of the past; we think they can learn a lot about writing poetry from reading Andrew Marvell and Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot. It is the most fluid arrangement I know of in this country.

Above all, we try to persuade the students that this is an art, that there is craft to it, that it's a serious matter, and that you cannot merely indulge your own gentler emotions under the pretense that you're writing poetry. You've got to take a hard-boiled attitude toward your own writing. If you don't, someone else will--a critic or a publisher.

Q. Isn't there some danger that the writing taught in universities will become sterile in the way the academic art of the nineteenth century did?

A. I think the degree to which teachers in the past have always been classicists and conservatives is probably much exaggerated. Even if it was once true, it's no longer true. In this country, I would say that one of the principal contributors to a

new way of approaching the writing of poetry is Robert Penn Warren, who has been teaching in American universities for all of his career.

The English critic V. S. Pritchett said that the danger in the writer being around the college was that he would lose his native vulgarity. I know a great many writers at colleges, and as far as I can tell they're just as vulgar as they ever were. Yet this is a real risk. If writing is taught by people who are not themselves truly talented and practicing writers, you're liable to get a very pallid product.

- Q. The Times Literary Supplement once said that were Shelley to come to Iowa City and preach Marxism he would soon be dismissed. What is your reaction to that?
- A. Immediately after World War II, there was a very fine American poet. We had an opening: he needed a job. We went to see the president of the university and said this is the best man for the job, but in the past two years, he has been in federal prison and a psychopathic hospital. Now these are normally not regarded as the highest recommendations for life on a campus. Yet he was hired, and we were proud to have him. If Shelley came to Iowa and started talking Marxism, I do not believe he would be thrown out. If the effort were made I would oppose it.
- Q. Is there any conflict between the writing teachers and the literature teachers at Iowa?
- A. All of us who teach writing at American universities have a few colleagues who hope that on any given day we will step out in the street and fall down a manhole. Fine. This gives an opportunity to express our own candid view of a great deal of the scholarship done in the field, which does not strike me as terribly good. So much of it deals with absolute trivia, so much of it deals with ground that has been worked over before and so much of it treats literature as if it were nothing but social history.
- Q. A great many good writers have studied at Iowa. How did being there help them become better writers?
- A. That's a good phrase--"better writers." We don't say we can make them into writers, but only that we can help them mature faster than they might have elsewhere. In this country, as scattered as we are, there has been a great problem for the writer, especially when very young--where should he go? Is it proper to write? Is this not a suspicious activity? The presence of

a community where a writer can go and immediately be involved with a group of people who are seriously trying to be better poets and fiction writers has been of great benefit.

- Q. W. D. Snodgrass, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1960, was at Iowa. How did it contribute to his development?
- A. It is my impression that W. D. Snodgrass found a very congenial atmosphere at the University of Iowa. I hope he doesn't mind if I say he was rather shy when he first came, and here were other poets with whom he found a good deal of sympathy. Furthermore, I think the criticism he had there--and not merely from me, but from, for example, Robert Lowell--was very useful to him. His first book was a remarkable collection--all these poems were finished poems. One reason they were, I think, is because Snodgrass adopted an attitude that is in the writing program--that is to say, you work at a poem until it is absolutely as good as you can make it. Almost all of those poems had been criticized in the poetry workshop; we were not responsible for their quality, but we were responsible, in part, for the fact that Snodgrass was so eager to go back and get them right.
- Q. In a sense, your function is that of a critic. What are the most common faults in student writing?
- A. I would say that the largest single fault is a poor command of the language. By poor I don't mean hopeless; I mean inadequate for the job he's trying to do. The second largest flaw lies in the failure of the writer to realize the form he must make out of this material. Too much of the writing is mere material. After World War II, for example, we had an enormous number of boys writing accounts of experiences in the war. Now it was very difficult to persuade them that because it was dramatic or occasionally frightful for them it was not enough to put down that fact; there had to be some craft involved or it would not be dramatic or frightful for the reader.
- Q. Why Iowa? Do you subscribe to a sort of corn belt Gestalt, as some of your critics have suggested?
- A. As an environment, I think it's a very good one--a small university town, full of huge elm trees, and close to the sort of life that goes on around it. In the middle of Iowa City, you may be off in a euphoric state because you've just written good poems, but then the trucks full of squealing pigs go by and remind you of the real world. The real world of Iowa is on the whole often more attractive than the world of the dirty street

and the dark alley, although these are by no means hostile--remember Baudelaire's remark, "I have taken your mud, oh Paris, and made from it gold." But there are definite, definable advantages to Iowa City. For one thing, what else is there to do there but write? It isn't full of distractions. Furthermore, I think the medium way of life there is a good one for the writer--I don't say forever, but for a year or two.

- Q. In what way is the atmosphere at the University beneficial for the writers who go there to teach?
- A. I have several answers to that. One: they are extremely well treated when they come. They are given considerable leisure. They are treated like artists, on the assumption that it is wrong to bring a man to the University as a writer and then to so overload him with work and courses to teach that he can't write. All this is enormously attractive to a writer. Two: the presence of students of real talent is a very attractive thing, too. Three: the University gives the writer a certain sense of community. One of the great literary themes of the century has been the alienation of the artist, including the writer, from society. To a great extent, we've broken that down; the writer feels that he's really welcome at the University of Iowa.

--From *New York Herald Tribune*, Books, May 12, 1963.

Reminiscences at Retirement, 1977

1.

I have spent 40 years helping other writers, American and foreign. We have made Iowa synonymous with writing. That is more of an achievement than I ever thought I could do, and to do it in Iowa City, a small town, at a university of modest resources.

There is something challenging and rewarding about creating a program where it is sympathetically received, but where it is extremely difficult to get it established and funded.

I've never been interested in the past. I have always found the present interesting and I find the future fascinating. I've always looked ahead. I was always the kind of person who wanted to do everything.

It's much harder to be a really first-class husband and father than to be a good poet. The human things are the most difficult and most honorable things that you can do.

---From "Paul Engle: World Figure Retires,"
Cedar Rapids Gazette, July 10, 1977

2.

I didn't do what I wanted to do. I wanted to make Iowa City the center for the future of American literature. The record is honorable. But it's not what could have been done with only twice the support. And we wanted to make this a center for world literature, a free community. To a degree Hualing and I have done that, but it's not what could have been done.

Insularity, narrowness, provincialism--a curse, but not only a curse, an enormous danger. This country cannot know too much about the world for its own security.

I am not complaining. Everybody's got to get out or the young can't get jobs. But at what you might call the end of my career I would not like to be regarded as a money raiser, a promoter, an inventor only. I was a teacher. I love teaching. I'm also a great believer in cooperation. I would love to have more people, the whole world, involved in the things we do.

--- From "Poet, Writer's Workshop Founder
Retires,"
The Daily Iowan, July 12, 1977

3.

All my life my work at the University of Iowa has been, to put it kindly, "different" from the usual academic career. and, to put it more truthfully, "more eccentric" than the usual academic career. Looking back on it, I can see that my duties here have been essentially to be an innovator, to invent new things.

It must be admitted that in the first days of the effort to make a program in creative writing my former wife was extremely helpful and kind to a very great many people. She went with me late at night to the bus stop and the railroad station. We'd take people home and at midnight, one in the morning, she'd feed them. Often we'd put them up. We used to have bodies scattered all over the house! Sometimes we never knew just how many were there for breakfast.

There are few people who have remained neutral in regard to my life. Some like me excessively, feel a very great affection for me, and some dislike me excessively, hate my guts. I probably don't deserve either extreme.

As I look back on my career, I can see that I was an odd combination--in about equal measure--of my mother and of my father, who were absolute opposites in human personality.

So I regard myself as having had a curious combination of my father's practical nature and my mother's more imaginative nature. What this means is that on any given day one or the other of these factors is dominant, and if it happens to be the day that my father is dominating me, I can irritate a hell of a lot of people and I can get very--well, my father had a terrible temper. So did I. I have more or less learned to control mine because of the other half of my nature, which I attribute to my mother. Besides, universities are difficult places for temper. But it's down there and don't get me started because it's ready and waiting! And that's my father coming out in me. Mad! Grab the halter of a horse and prove to this immense animal that he can't kick you! Well, that's a difficult state of mind of living in a university community.

You do not create new programs without driving hard and if you drive hard you're going to irritate people. Quiet people don't offend. That goes back to the fact that you have to make a certain amount of noise to get a horse's attention and I've treated the University as a horse.

You know, I'm an eight-day-a-week worker, as is Hualing, by the way. Nights, holidays, weekends mean nothing. And that's how you get things done.

I don't think people work as hard as they should. It's traditional for the old to say of the young, "They don't work hard." But I don't

think the middle-aged faculty at this University work as hard. I have never heard anybody say that. If you're in business and you don't produce, you get a little note one day saying you are terminated as of a certain number of weeks from this date. That builds a fire under people. I don't think people should be promoted or given raises as easily as they are, merely for surviving, or merely in the hope they'll do something. Prove it!

A businessman has a quicker mind than most faculty members. He's got to--if he makes a mistake, he's out of business and out on the streets. If Bob Commings makes a mistake, 50,000 people know about it.

I have a provincial record in the sense that I've never taught at another university, though I've had offers, in fact, could have been a dean and could have been a university president. But I think there's a strength in continuity. I know the dogs and the people and the trees of this city. I remember the planting of trees that are large now. I love Iowa City as a place to live.

So I think there's a great deal of value to being close to home, though not if you have never left. I like Iowa because I know what Hong Kong is like and what Warsaw is like. I appreciate this state and this area because I have seen so many others. I come back with pleasure. But having gone away for a time is quite as important as staying.

Besides, I have always looked to the future. I have never found the past as interesting as the present and I've never found the present as interesting as the future. If you're looking for my secret, I guess that's it.

--From 'A Delicate and Imaginative Aggression'
by Steve Wilbers (*The Iowa Alumni Review*, June/July 1977)