

9/22/2023: SPECTER OF PROFESSIONALIZATION

In contrast to traditionally self-directed paths into literary creativity— “the call of the Muse” —today’s literary content producers are ever more like athletes: trained, practicing, coached, competing, hoping to win... How have you dealt with the specter of professionalization in your own writing?

1. Loren GLASS (UI English Department)

This is a particularly appropriate prompt for the institutional space we occupy today. No institution is more haunted by the specter of professionalization than the University of Iowa, where the renowned Writers’ Workshop was founded almost a century ago. And it is a particularly appropriate prompt for me, as I’m writing a history of creative writing at the University of Iowa. Since the apparent conflict between inspiration and professionalization is at the heart of that history, I’m going to take advantage of the brief time I have today to summarize my argument about it.

It was in a classroom on this campus that Paul Engle had a vision, a vision that he would triumphantly announce on the first page of the first anthology of workshop writers, *Midland: Twenty-five Years of Fiction and Poetry, selected from the Writing Workshops of the State University of Iowa*. He envisioned “the steady development at the University of Iowa of the conviction that the creative imagination in all the arts is as important, as congenial, and as necessary, as the historical study of the all the arts.” Engle’s vision was to facilitate an accommodation between the individual creative imagination and the institution of higher education, which had traditionally been seen in stark opposition.

Engle conceded that talent could not be taught. As he elaborates in his preface to *Midland*: “We do not pretend to have produced the writers included in this book. Their talent was inevitably shaped by the genes rattling in ancestral closets. We did give them a community in which to try out the quality of their gift.” Engle understood what his most famous student, Flannery O’Connor, affirmed, that real writers have “been called to do so by the presence of a gift.” Engle’s peculiar gift was to be able to identify the giftedness of others. As he claimed, “I had, if I may say so, a nose for sniffing out talent. The way a dog sniffs out a bone. I could sniff talent.” The prevailing assumption of the Workshop remains that talent cannot be taught but it can be identified and nurtured.

But once you’ve identified and selected your gifted candidates, what do they do on campus? Engle knew that he would need to convince administrators and funders that he wasn’t just bringing a bunch of bohemian deadbeats to Iowa City to get drunk and stoned and make trouble. This is where the concept of craft comes in. Unlike talent, craft can be taught. As Engle emphasizes in the introduction to *On Creative Writing*, billed on the title page as “significant, practical advice to help the writer learn the demands of his craft and develop his talent,” “All those writers who have commented on their craft agree that a work of art is work.” Writing is hard work that requires discipline, and this axiom would compensate for the unteachability of talent and provide an ideological counterweight to the beatnik bohemianism—that risked making the Workshop look like one long subsidized bar crawl. Engle’s vision was to recruit cohorts of talented writers to Iowa City, where they would collectively hone their craft.

International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm) 304 EPB Gerber Lounge

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Mansoura Ez-Eldin (Egypt), Loren Glass (UI English Department),
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His vision was not without its critics. Some saw it as elitist, based in the assumption that only a chosen few writers truly have talent. Others saw it as too democratic, promising too many untalented writers that they could succeed. Some saw it as too individualistic, focusing on the talented individual as the source of good writing. Others critiqued it as too conformist, forcing writers to adapt to established genres and forms. What the paradoxical complementarity of these critiques reveal is that Engle did find a way to resolve the conflict between inspiration and professionalization, and he did this by creating a “community of writers,” a collective sweet spot where elitism and populism, individuality and conformism, productively converge.

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