

THE YOUNG WRITER, PRESENT, PAST, AND FUTURE

BY
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ON THIS, the occasion of giving the annual Hopwood Awards, a few of you must be thinking about the first step in your career signified by receiving an award. In a rather varied life, one of the things I have never done is to win a literary prize. My first duty is to congratulate you on an achievement that fills me with admiration. But I must add a word of warning, which you can attribute to sour grapes if you wish. You only have to look at lists of Nobel Prizes, Pulitzer Prizes, and the rest to realize how changeable—if not fallible—is the judgment of literary juries.

In a way of course, this is rather consoling. To those of us—who are always in a democratic majority—who have not won prizes, it shows that we may be better than you who have. There is even more solid consolation to be derived from reflecting that those of us who do not deserve prizes may well win them, since the example of many who have won them shows that in the past there has not always been an absolutely necessary connection between prize-winning and desert.

Now that I'm on this aspect of the literary career—of which you are today

tasting the first fruits—I may as well tell you that, economically speaking, being a writer is very like being a gambler. The story or article that earns you \$10 might equally well earn you \$1,000. Sometimes you are paid a few pennies for a review, sometimes enough to keep you for a month. And what is true of the economics of the thing is also true of reputation. Many writers living today who have great reputations were hardly known during the long years when they were doing their best work. Anyone who has lived as a writer for twenty years or more knows too that one's stock goes up and down in what is a fluctuating market of critical opinions.

I mention these things in order to get them out of the way. The point really is that, although writers have to get started in one way or another with earning money and getting work published, these things are irrelevant. When I say irrelevant, I don't mean just that they don't matter; I mean that part of the struggle of being a writer is to watch and to be on guard that they don't have relevance. To be a failure can be discouraging. To be a success may mean something much worse: that you feel surrounded by people who want you to go on being one. Your publisher has sold fifty thousand copies of your last book, and is appalled when you bring in a manuscript of what may be a better book, but of which he knows he can sell only two thousand copies. The more you are known the more you discover that you are in some mysterious

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way arousing expectations in all sorts of individuals and groups of people who, since they read your work, feel that you have a certain responsibility towards them.

Shortly before he died, the English

people and behavior very different from those expected by the readers of his best-selling novels. I became excited at his idea and pressed him to start writing this book which I felt sure would be his masterpiece.



STEPHEN SPENDER

*The English poet and critic who delivered the 1953
Hopwood Lecture*

novelist, Sir Hugh Walpole, outlined to me the idea of a novel he wanted to write. It was on a subject very close to his heart, which he felt he understood better than others. From the way he spoke it was clear that this unwritten book was the one work in which he could portray his realest experience of life. However, it would describe

“No,” he said, “I shall never write it.” “Why not?” “Because I could not write it in a way which would please my best-selling public. It would have to be produced in a small edition, for not more than two thousand readers. And after selling one hundred thousand copies of each of my novels, I could not endure that.”

We can assume, I think, that anyone who simply wants to sell a lot of copies of his books will—if he knows this already—plan his career accordingly. He will not be a writer, but a businessman who is dealing with words as other people deal with any other mass-produced commodity. He will have no illusions, so he will not suffer at the end of his life from the kind of heart-break which makes Sir Hugh Walpole—if a failure in his own art—the subject of a great biography by Rupert Hart-Davis, which has recently been published.

Now that the decks have been cleared of success and failure, what are the legitimate needs of the young writer? It's better, I think, to put the question in a form in which it can be examined by examples. What did the young writer of the past need, as the pre-conditions necessary to his gift?

LET us consider for instance, John Keats and Ernest Hemingway, two young men; one in London at the beginning of the nineteenth and the other in Paris at the beginning of this century.

What of Keats? Well, first of all, he wanted to write poetry for no reason except that he wanted to write poetry. His concept of poetry was formed from reading Spenser, Shakespeare, and, later, Milton. To him, poetry was the means of entering the world of other poets and then creating his own poems. Besides being a poet, he was a medical student, he was devoted to his brother Tom (whom he nursed through the consumption that he himself was very soon to die of), to his sister, Fanny Keats, and in the last months of his life, to Fanny Brawne, with whom he fell so hopelessly in love.

Poetry was for him a separate world from the real world of his medical studies, his brothers and sisters, even his love. Thus, in one of his letters he describes an occasion when the classroom or laboratory where he was studying suddenly disappeared, and

he found himself in another world, even more real to him, of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In another letter, written when he was nursing his brother, he complains that the identity of Tom Keats presses on him unendurably, a pressure he resents not out of selfishness but because he felt responsible to his world of poetry more even than to his brother. There was also something about his love for Fanny which seemed to him the surrender of his poetic world to a human one.

The next thing we note about the young Keats is that he wanted convivial friends who shared his love of poetry, provided that they did not press on him too much with their personalities. When he was twenty or so, he allowed himself to think that with Reynolds, Benjamin Robert Haydon, Cowden Clarke, Leigh Hunt and the rest, he had found a circle of enlightened people who recognized the same poetic values as he did. He wanted to belong to a group of friends who correspond very much to the group of French writers who will frequent the same Parisian cafe. Perhaps, in America today, this function of literary companionship is being fulfilled rather self-consciously, and with not enough frivolity to accompany the seriousness, by the creative writing courses. Brandy and coffee ought to be compulsory at all the creative writing seminars.

The next thing Keats wanted was to chart his course among the currents of literature and thought in his time. He disliked Pope's poetry, which he regarded as mere versification. He had very clearly developed ideas of his own about the world of pure imagination which poetry should create. He found precedents for his concept of poetry in Shakespeare. He was critical, though admiring, of Wordsworth. He was a not very generous rival of Shelley. He came to sneer at Leigh Hunt, and he grew out of the circle of his Hampstead friends into the isolation of genius.

Although he wrote that he had never

allowed a shadow of public thought to enter his work, Keats was not without opinions. He was what we would call a liberal. He loved freedom (by which he meant Liberal Freedom) and hated Napoleon and the British government of his day.

Now let us turn to the young Hemingway in Paris a hundred years later. His attitudes are less literary than those of Keats. He would deny, I think, having read much of anything, though he would admit to a great admiration for Stendhal. But don't let us be put off by his anti-literary pose without examining it more closely. He is not bookish, but he cares immensely about writing well, and takes a conscious pride in his use of words. Despite his pride, he goes humbly to Gertrude Stein and learns all he can from her about adding word to word with as much thought as if one were making a mosaic, and each word a separate stone.

Thus, the difference between the literary conscience of Hemingway and that of Keats may be the difference between romantic poet and modern novelist rather than that between man of literature and hairy-chested philistine. Hemingway knows that the roots of the novel are not in literature but in life. Although he can learn how to make sentences from Miss Stein and how to write about a battle from the description of Fabrice on the battlefield of Waterloo with which *The Charterhouse of Parma* opens—he sees that beyond learning how to write his own novels from other writers such a novelist must avoid literature like the plague. His source-books are the conversations of soldiers and drunks, the lonely thoughts of fishermen and hunters.

Just as much as Keats, Hemingway had then his special vision of a world of his imagination, a world in which love and drinks and fights and scenery were more real than, say, intellectual conversation, journalism, money, and stuffed shirts. In a drawing room his picture of prize fights, hunting in Africa, and war in Spain would

doubtless drive out the china and chippendale, just as much as the world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* came dancing down on a beam of sunlight into the room where Keats was learning medicine and made him forget the lecture.

Given the fact that he was trying to make novels out of life and not out of other novels, Hemingway also had his circle. Just as Keats, without very much success, looked in Hampstead for friends who shared his passion for the arts, Hemingway was looking for people who shared his passion for the real—which was the quality he wanted to put into his novels. They turned out to be bull-fighters, soldiers at Caporetto and in the front line at Madrid, and Americans in Paris. But the real Hemingway no more belongs to his tough circle than Keats to his Hampstead literati. The ultimate image we have of Hemingway is of the old man left fighting the fish of his art alone.

This is, indeed always, the situation of the artist with his vocation, pursuing his vision. All the same, he probably needs to start off from the fertilizing group of his friends who—perhaps only because they are generous and young, and do not themselves know as yet what they really want—form a magic circle round his youth.

Hemingway, like Keats, fought his battle among the ideas of his time. When he was lion-hunting in Africa he was also carrying on a polemic against Aldous Huxley, who had reproached him with being anti-intellectual. He showed pretty well, I think, that the intellect is a matter of passion and not of books. A few asides on his work about Goya and El Greco are impressive enough to make the reader realize that a writer with an understanding of painting does not need to show it all the time. Then, just as Keats without ever being what is called "political" wrote his sonnet to salute Leigh Hunt when he had been imprisoned for defamation by the British Government of that time, Hemingway took up the

attitudes of an unpolitical man who loved freedom to the politics of the 1930's. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* corresponds in his work to Keats's sonnet celebrating Leigh Hunt when he was sent to prison. And all through his work there is a preoccupation with the relationship of those characters who are felt to be real because they have done real things—or because they have lived close to the values of nature—with the unreality of the politicians who direct the soldiers, the businessmen who have more power than the artists and the fishermen. For him freedom is the struggle of real life to assert itself against meddling and self-interested authority.

I COULD go on multiplying examples to illustrate that the young writer is someone with a mysterious sense of his own vocation, and a vision of reality which he wishes to communicate: to show, too, that in his youth he can benefit by the magic circle of those who are touched to sympathy by him, perhaps more for what he is than for what he does. His friends believe in *him* and they take his work on trust. Later on they become interested in other things—they cannot share his vocation—and he learns to be alone. But his youth has been watered by their sympathy.

He must certainly care for his craft as a writer. He must choose other writers who are guardian angels from the past whose works seem to be fighting on the side of his unborn poems or novels. What I very much doubt, though, is whether he should know more than this. One of the things that many modern writers perhaps suffer from is intellectual indigestion. We are told that Shakespeare had small Latin and less Greek, and the number of works he is supposed by scholars to have read would certainly not have filled even a small library. What he knew is so perfectly absorbed within his own genius that we are scarcely aware of his knowing it.

Shakespeare probably understood just so

much of what he read as he required for the purpose of his writing. This is all a writer needs and it may be very little or it may be a great deal. With Dante and Milton it was a lot. A writer should think of every experience (and this includes the books he reads and the paintings he sees) in terms of the life which he is going to put into his work. He should be as much on guard against the corruption which comes from excessive sophistication and a too great load of learning as he is against any debasement of his gifts. Rimbaud advised writers to throw away dictionaries and reinvent words, and Blake thought that the forms in which past poets wrote became the shackles of new poetry. D. H. Lawrence, who was probably the most profound critic of modern values in this century, was utterly opposed to all the intellectual tendencies of our time, read little of his esteemed contemporaries, and not very selectively from the past.

None of these writers was an ignoramus, but all saw the necessity of approaching knowledge and theories about literature with the same lively precaution as you would enter a forest full of poison ivy and snares. They saw that intellectual life is not a passive process like hypnosis which you submit to, hoping that you will be entranced into doing something beyond your natural powers. You have to meet the intellectual work of others with your own powers, according to your capacity to cope with it, and not be overpowered by it. Intellectual life for a writer should be a struggle of all the forces of his life with other minds which he can meet on equal terms.

So here we have that timeless creature, the young writer, with his vocation, his vision of what is real to him, his magic circle of friends, the struggle of his whole existence within the ideas, the movements and the history of his time. He is timeless, and yet he is a kind of animal who tries to find the place within his time where he can best fulfill his gifts. He struggles to

be received into the court of Queen Elizabeth or Louis XIV, or to be patronized by some great aristocrat of the eighteenth century, or to achieve the independence of a bourgeois living and working for himself in the nineteenth. He is a parasite, and often rather an ungrateful one. In her novel *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf describes the poet who comes to stay at Orlando's residence, where he charms everyone, and then goes away to write a perfidious lampoon on Orlando and his friends. When he claims his right to middle-class independence, as poets did in the nineteenth century, it is in order to spit on the bourgeois. He arrives as Rimbaud arrived in Paris in 1870, puts his feet up on the table of Madame Verlaine's clean dining room, takes out his pipe, smoking it upside down so that the hot ash falls onto her tablecloth, and shoos away her lap-dog, with the expletive comment: "Les chiens sont les liberaux."

But the position of the young writer differs according to the time in which he lives. His impossible behavior takes different forms according to whether he emerges from the cocoon of his family in 1450, 1550, 1650, 1750, 1850, or 1950, or whatever day of whatever year between these dates. In 1800 he is a revolutionary patriot, wild-eyed, unshaven, and influenced by the self-dramatizing self-pity and passion for freedom of Byron's *Prisoner of Chillon*. In 1900 he holds a lily in his hand, is languid, tired, dissipated, and infinitely superior to the universe. In 1914 he marches onto the battlefields of Europe and with a song on his lips proclaims that the world is about to be purified of ignoble qualities. In 1916 he is the voice of the youthful dead of both sides which hold no hatred for one another. By 1920 he has taken to alcohol and various other excesses, and he represents the naked, almost brutal assertion of his survival against a background of recently past death. He swears that whatever else happens, he will never

be responsible towards anyone or anything again and he spits into the faces of the older generation. Under all these attitudes, he maintains the sense of his vocation. What in our time can the writer do, is the question he is asking, but by "doing" he means, how can he write his novels or poems. The answers are always changing, and as the time-process of our civilization speeds up they change from year to year with ever-increasing rapidity.

So the differences are less confusing when we recollect that the writer adopts attitudes for the sake of his writing. An attitude—or, for that matter, a literary movement—is the simplified statement of the relationship to his time which he adopts in order that he may best write his best work. Thus the young writers at the beginning of the French Revolution had to relate themselves to two things in contemporary history, which became one thing within their work. One was the changed attitude toward values which had been brought about by the French Revolution, the other was the fact that their immediate predecessors were writing in a style which could not possibly be the vehicle for the altered sensibility resulting from the change from aristocratic values to democratic ones. These two things became one imaginative life within the colloquial manner of writing of Wordsworth, the romanticism of Keats.

WHAT is the writer's vision, though? With the poet it is his significant experience expressed in a poetic idiom which responds or is sensitive to the circumstances of his time. The poet's ideas of what is most valuable, because most living is experience, confront the world with his idiom of the contemporary human situation. The novelist illustrates, in his depiction of character, the struggle of individual human existence within the circumstances of a particular historic period. The young man Tolstoi shows us a whole panorama of the circumstances of individuals living through the

Napoleonic wars. Although *War and Peace* is all, in a sense, a depiction of life, the values of living are only realized at their most intense in moments of the lives of particular characters. Moments of Natasha's vivid childhood, of Pierre Bezukhov's changes of heart—most of all perhaps the moment when Prince Andrew lies wounded on the battlefield. The novel portrays the struggle for the realization of life within the circumstances of living. If the conditioning circumstances are not truly imagined and portrayed within the work, then the life in the novel seems false; and if the circumstances are realized, then the work becomes a depressing exercise in what is called realism.

There is no way in which a writer can cheat himself into having a greater awareness of life than his genius has given him. There are, however, circumstances and conditions which can cheat him out of the possibility of realizing his gifts. It is more difficult to be a young writer at some periods than at others. There are some decades when the mood of the time seems to permit of a much wider realization of the values of living than others. In England the Elizabethan age was certainly such a time. There are others when a great many writers work under circumstances where life itself seems weighed down and oppressed, and yet the material development of society is so expansive and confident that masterpieces are written. The Victorian Age was such a period. But although nineteenth century England was ebullient and expansive, yet it is really the literature of France in this period which tells us more of what was happening to the spirit of man.

"What is the position of the young writer today?" That is the question at the back of my mind all the time that I have been talking. For it seems to me that in certain ways this question is more difficult to answer than it has been for a great many years.

The reason it is difficult to answer is that the one thing that previously was clear

about the position of the writer has suddenly become amorphous. What has been clear for so long was his extreme individuality. The writer has for a hundred and fifty years regarded himself and been regarded as an independent creator or critic within society who brought to it his own vision or who attacked it from the point of view of a detached observer. For instance, we think of Keats and the other romantics as being outside the materialism of the industrial revolution. Perhaps they opposed the materialism of the nineteenth century, or perhaps they added something to life which made circumstances tolerable and even justified modern civilization. Whichever it was they did, rightly or wrongly, we think of them as *outside* their society. The French poets, like Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, we think of as still more savagely isolated individualists, who were antagonistic to all contemporary values. We think, too, of the novelists either as being critics of Victorianism who judged their age from a disinterested point of view or as truthful observers of character, who were able to indicate the points at which life acquires the greatest significance. Flaubert's *The Sentimental Education*, for example, is a scrupulous and exact study of the lives of a group of individuals against a background of history, and at the end we are able to measure the extent to which Frederic Moreau and the other characters have lived their lives, attained happiness, suffered to some purpose, created beauty, or loved.

Today we suddenly find ourselves living in a world where it is very difficult to think of the poet creating a unique vision like that of Keats, which will so enormously enhance the value of living for his readers that his poetry will seem a system of the imagination where "beauty is truth, truth beauty," and nothing else need be added to life. It is equally difficult to think of the novelist being an independent, detached critic of society. We suddenly find that the

individual visions, which right up to the time of the aesthetic movement could add something so significant within art to the value of life that ordinary life itself seemed scarcely worth living, have shrunk into private fantasies, childhood memories, squibs like Truman Capote's novel about some people who decide to go and live in a tree—or like Henry Miller's books in which all his characters indulge themselves to the utmost in physical sensation and have no philosophy or purpose beyond such indulgence.

What has happened is that the idea that there are writers and other artists and sensitive individuals who in some way can preserve an integrity and create beauty outside the materialism of society, has suddenly been completely shattered. We may not live in a totalitarian world, but a kind of totalitarianization of the spirit has overtaken all of us. In a world where within a matter of hours or days the whole of our civilization may be destroyed, or where if this does not happen we may find our minds the passive objects of political dictatorship, using psychological propaganda, everyone shares with everyone else such enormous secrets of fear and anxiety that the idea of being outside what is happening—as Keats in his way, and Dickens in his quite different way, were outside it—seems impossible. Indeed a writer, like T. S. Eliot, who does retain a certain outsidership, only manages to do so by describing a religious experience which is outside time and history altogether.

We cannot imagine that the young writer of genius will today believe himself to be a unique person in a unique position bringing to other people a picture of living values which will change the lives of those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Instead now of an art which will add another world of the imagination to the material world, we have literature of young novelists which, however eccentric or fantastic it may seem, is really documentary. Some-

one who lives in the deep South had some very extraordinary and crazy relatives whom he is going to tell us about. Someone else had a very odd relationship with one of the masters at his preparatory school or at the military academy. A woman who was frustrated in her desire to become cultured never got to the Museum of Modern Art, so she became a nymphomaniac, upset her family badly and was finally taken away in a van. All these experiences can be original and it is possible to write about them well, but they do not enhance the life of the reader, and they do not criticize the world in which we are living. No amount of odd experience and good writing and all the characters going mad can really get away from the fact that they are really just embroidered documentary material.

In these circumstances, the young writer is tempted to abandon his artistic responsibility—that is, his responsibility to do what he knows he alone can do in the way he alone can do it. On every side, there are voices which say: "Don't be responsible to yourself. It is no longer any use. Be responsible to us." In England he is invited to become an agent for disseminating culture through the British Broadcasting Corporation, or the British Council. In the United States he is invited to join a university to become a teacher of creative writing, with a certain real though vaguely defined responsibility to the academic world. Meanwhile a tremendous critical apparatus based on a study of the past works of writers, most of whom hated the very idea of critics and criticism, grows up and rules about technique, influences, myths, and so on are extracted from past works, which get very near to supplying the young with objective formulae for creating new ones. There is a great deal of talk about Freud and Jung and the unconscious, but the fact that writing should be a process of whose development the writer himself should be largely unconscious is

forgotten. At this point it may be well to remind ourselves that Goethe observed to Eckermann that it would be impossible in the future for any poet to attain the stature of Shakespeare. The reason he gave for this conclusion was that the result of contemporary criticism would make it impossible for any poet to develop, as Shakespeare did, without being self-conscious about his own development. The true development of a poet like Shakespeare—Goethe thought—was like that of a man who walks in his sleep.

THE temptation of the writer of yesterday—W. H. Auden has said—was to be too individualistic, too proud, too isolated. But the temptation of the writer today—he went on—is to prostitute himself, to make slight concessions all the way round: to the academies, to the cultural agencies, to the glossy magazines which have decided that they want to publish something “better” than they have done before, but not too good.

In the present situation it is extremely difficult to say what is the right course for the young writer. You can't, as you would perhaps do in the past, advise “Find the right patron who will give you the freedom to do your best work which will glorify his name,” nor yet “Create in your work the vision of an inner life of aesthetic values which will enable your readers to escape the vulgarity and banality of modern living”; nor “Take sides with the cause which represents greater human freedom and draw strength from the life and future of the just cause you support.” It is not as easy as that. Nor do I accept the despairing view of George Orwell in his very interesting essay on Henry Miller, entitled *Inside the Whale*. Orwell says in words which I paraphrase: “Accept the fact that you can do absolutely nothing to alter the condition of the world today. Make a virtue of necessity, and like Jonah, use your art to get inside the whale. Don't object, don't rebel, just accept

everything and then make the best of the circumstances of a life of private sensations and experience which is still possible to you.” His own book, 1984, like Camus' novel, *The Plague*, refutes him. It is still possible, by trying to see the largest truth about the time in which we live, and by simply stating it, to get outside the whale.

Meanwhile, one can also say that there are certain things which are wrong, and even a few which are right. It may be necessary to accept the situation of working in a more official capacity—as a teacher, or a cultural agent—than before, but it is still not necessary to sell your soul. By selling your soul I mean not cherishing the distinction between work which one does to satisfy one's own standards and that done to satisfy other people's standards. One's own standards are simply to write about the truth as one experiences it, in the way in which one can write about it. To discover these two things is already the task of a lifetime, and by simply devoting oneself to them one may solve the problems which I have stated here.

Another positive thing which I can say is that the young should be an audience for one another. In this the creative writing courses, of which I feel critical in some ways, offer a tremendous opportunity to young writers. It may not be that all of you are going to be writers, but there is every reason why all of you should be interested in the writing of each one of you. The interest that you can give to the writer who is going to be outstanding among you is the equivalent, at this stage of his development, to a blood transfusion. And it is blood which only the young can give to others who are young, because later on in life everyone is too preoccupied with his own affairs to give so generously. No one ever receives in all his life any praise which is comparable to that which one receives when one has sent one's first work to a friend who feels it to be a new and exciting experience in his own life.

The most important thing of all, though, is to have an absolutely sacred sense of the vocation of being a writer. A writer is a person who experiences with part of himself the life around him and with some other part of himself the life of those past writers whose works have filled him with the desire to be a writer. In his own work he relates his sense of that past with his awareness of this present. In doing so he creates something entirely new, and this new thing, if it is worthy, is to write the words which the past master would write about contemporary life if he were now living. Through the contemporary writer's hand flows the blood of past writers, and to the

degree that the present writers fulfill their vocation they are extending into the future the life of the old. There remains the problem of relating oneself to the present situation. But the true writer lives in a past and a future situation for which the present is only a bridge. This reduces the contemporary problem to its true proportions. It means that although you must be aware of the present situation you must see it in the light of the past and future, pursue your vocation, write as well as you can and not better than you can, provide an audience for your contemporaries, and judge life from the center of your artistic conscience, to which you are alone responsible.