

ISAAC ROSENFELD

# CONFESSIONS OF A WRITING TEACHER

*Why do . . . the people imagine a  
vain thing? — PS. 2:1.*

DURING THE ENTIRE FOUR YEARS that I taught writing at a great eastern university, I had a guilty conscience because I felt obliged to hold back something from my students. Now I am free to speak, and glad to unburden myself of the following statement: *Writing courses are a waste of time and money for everyone concerned.*

It is a pity that so many hundreds of thousands of people want to be writers. Why they do I will never

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know. Writing is a thankless profession, a heartbreaking profession, a profession in which the disappointments are many and the rewards few. No doubt most people imagine a writer's life to be full of glamor, ease, and adventure. That it is nothing of the kind, I need not trouble to demonstrate. There exists the fairly widespread counter-myth, considerably nearer the truth, which features mountains of rejection slips and unpaid bills; and though his neighbors will often come upon the writer in daytime in silly or feigned (actually, resentful) surprise, "Don't you have to work for a living?" they know quite well, if they are even the least bit snoopy, that he works as hard as anyone and often has less to show for his labor than most of the middle class.

To be sure, there is a more so-

phisticated view of the writer, which few people hold. This view attributes to him, as it does to any artist, the good fortune of being able to support himself by doing what he wants to do. Unlike the mass of wage earners, he gets paid for being himself! I admit this is an enviable condition, but it is by no means easy, as it renders the compromises with life which the writer must make in areas other than his art so much the more distasteful and difficult to bear. Besides, it is a condition to which few people should aspire, as the prospect of being themselves, *with no external occupation, title, or rank to hide behind*, is precisely the one which fills most men with dread. But undoubtedly, the greatest number of illusions about writing are furnished by the desire for fame. This again is a mistake, as skill in any other field, such as athletics or crime, is bound to bring surer, and probably just as lasting, results. (Of writers like myself, who have published for the most part in advance-guard media, one must say, the fewer the people who know our work, the more famous we are.) The only man I can think of whose motive for writing is sound, is the one who cannot help it, who has to sit down and write.

in the novel, short story, magazine article, or juveniles, or will pay money to learn how to write for radio, television, the movies, or the stage. Perhaps a greater number will sign up for similar courses by mail, falling for the ads of the various "institutes" which they have seen in the classified pages of the magazines, digests, tip sheets, and manuals that flourish on the popular delusion that writing can be taught. The suckers in this category are doomed. But surely the courses offered in the regular departments, evening sessions, or extension divisions of our great and respectable universities, staffed by conscientious instructors and often excellent and well-known writers, are no swindle! I daresay they are not; but whether they can be helpful, helpful enough so that the students' time and money are not wasted, is another question. The answer to this question depends upon how these courses are taught, and upon the attitudes and expectations the students bring into the classroom.

Almost all students show up on their first day expecting to learn a set of rules, principles, or formulas for writing, and most of them, alas, leave on the last day pleased to think they have learned these rules, or bitterly disappointed and wanting their money back because they have not. But there are no such rules to be taught or learned, and if the instructor fails to disabuse his students

WHATEVER THE REASON, nearly everyone wants to be a writer, and every year thousands of people of all ages will register for courses

of this folly, either he does not know what he is doing or he is not doing an honest job. Writing is not a subject like geometry, chemistry, or surveying, where everything follows from a set of principles. No matter how commercial you want to make it, writing is an art. And an art cannot be taught out of the rule book. (If it can be taught at all!)

The rules, if there really are any, do not exist in advance, but spring into being in the course of the work. Without the work, there is no art and there are no rules. (There is nowhere a single principle, sacred to teachers of writing, which cannot be shown to have been violated in some great work, and violated not only with impunity but often with advantage to the work.) Of course, one can always set about teaching art backwards, beginning with the rules; but the danger is that the teacher will do too good a job of it, and the student, naturally given to imitation and mistrustful of his own impulses, will be made, not an artist, but a slave of these rules for life.

But don't the magazines, from glossiest slicks to crumbly pulps, all publish stories written to formula? It certainly may look as though they do, yet their editors maintain — quite truthfully, I believe — that they buy stories on their merits, not on their degree of approximation to the formula. Even at this level, writing is an art — the writer must have aptitude and heart for

his work, and above all he must believe in what he is doing.

THE TROUBLE with most writing instructors is that they fail to teach this; with most writing students, that they fail to learn it. The student continues to have an utterly false conception of writing — that it is something mechanical, which can be learned by rote, by getting the right angle, the gimmick. He never learns that it is primarily a matter of feeling.

Look at any collection of children's paintings — even poorer examples will show a love of color and the sheer fun of splashing it on. The child is discovering the medium of paint, paper, and brush, and he is making his discovery — how colors run, blend, harmonize, and change — as he works. Words are also the medium of an art — but how many students discover the ring and color and splash of words? Most people are dead to language, and the language they use is accordingly a dead thing. Perhaps when they were children, they loved the play of words as much as the play of colors. But this love has been discouraged by having nothing to live on. The great American mistrust of intellect condemns the conspicuous gift of language as an affectation: a person who makes use of polysyllables swallowed the dictionary, and poetry, as everybody knows, is sissy. Writing that has any degree of elegance must

necessarily be false, and only a man who stammers in his speech can be sincere. These prejudices have so deep a hold on the population that most writing students despise the very subject they must study, and have forever lost their ear for its charm.

For what an ugly thing is the language of the writing students, void of any rhythm but the most sluggish and mechanical, and of all but the clumsiest words. This is also the language of newspaper and radio, of the lying advertisements and the pompous editorials; of the trashy books and the cheap magazines. All our lives we are exposed to this language, and everything in our existence which is meaningless, joyless, and drab is embedded in its clichés. But this is the language which the student must *unlearn* before he can hope to begin to write.

HOW ARE YOU going to impress this on minds whose fundamental outlook is mechanical? I recall the great difficulty I would always have in breaking my classes of the use of clichés. No sooner would they learn to recognize clichés, than their minds would create new ones: Give us, they demanded, a list of clichés, so we can check our writing against it. At this point, many a teacher has given up and taken a job selling beer. How are you going to make them see that the way out of one bad habit is not through the

formation of another? How are you going to make them feel words, hear them with the delicate part of the ear, respond to all their values and select the ones they want? I tried every trick and device that the experience of teaching cast up: lecture, discussion, anecdote, acting it out; patient criticism, and sometimes sarcastic; exercises in synesthesia and automatic writing; readings in Arthur Waley's translations of the Chinese poets, and excellent prose from any source; having them take in one another's wash; making them read aloud given passages with an exaggerated play of the facial muscles that they might learn to sense the different qualities of words right in the mouth, in relation to the difficulty or ease of speaking them — all this, and so many other improvisations and assignments, in the hope that once they learned to feel language, not only clichés but all their errors would be eliminated. Maybe one in fifty got the point.

It should follow from these remarks that writing is more than a mere mechanical skill or a proficiency in a given technique; it is a way of seeing and feeling and understanding — in short, a way of life. Now a way of life is not going to be learned in the classroom; a whole lifetime may not be long enough. But it is amazing how few are the students who are willing to learn even the little one can pick up in class. The moment the instructor

criticizes their shortcomings, they begin to object: that makes it too hard! They want quick results; fifteen weeks should be more than enough time to teach them the secrets of the trade. They are not even willing to read: Why waste all this time talking about Chekhov and Flaubert? We've got to be practical! A carpenter who showed such contempt for his craft would immediately be fired. A printer whose sole interest in setting type was to make himself famous and rich, and to hell with the job, would be forced to close down in a week. But though most students cannot understand that writing is something more than mechanical, they are unwilling even to put in the time one must devote to learning the simplest mechanical skill. They will never learn a thing.

I HAVE NOT EXAGGERATED the difficulty. If anything, it is much greater, because the teacher of writing is forced to cover it up. He dare not pop out with the truth: this is useless, go home! And the students who insist that he say whether there is any hope for their work, he cannot — enrollment being a precious thing — afford to tell anything but a lie. Besides, such frankness might be brutal. Keep trying, he is forced to say, your last piece showed some improvement; or, I have no way of knowing what you may turn out if you work hard. The deception continues, and the teacher, unless

he is well paid (which happens very seldom), or quite cynical (much less rare), berates himself as a hypocrite and contemplates this disconcerting paradox: the good writers don't need help, the bad writers are beyond help.

Of the good writers, not much need be said. Most of them go their own way, and though a few have been "discovered" in the writing classes, those who have never registered have not noticeably suffered for the omission. Bad writers are necessarily our concern, and the first thing that must be said of them is that in their psychology they are indistinguishable from the good, except that they are, as a rule, more arrogant and have even greater expectations. Invariably, they come to class to be discovered, or at the very least to have their work praised, and woe to the teacher who fails to be overwhelmed. The grapevine can hang him as a crank and an egotist, and if the rumor persists, it will reach the administration accompanied by an evidence of dwindling enrollment, while rarely does a word in his defense reach official ears. To prevent this catastrophe, the instructor will often make concessions, or try to baffle or divert his classes by a variety of stunts and stratagems, all of which lower the standard of his work.

There are two kinds of bad writers: the overwriters and the underwriters. (I am assuming that the writers

who still have grammar to learn have been screened out; largely a gratuitous assumption, for when the enrollment threatens to drop, the standards of admission decline with it.) The overwriters, usually though not necessarily women, put everything in a gush of adjectives and metaphors, ill-chosen and mixed. The writing is labored, overloaded, corny and cute, with an occasional variant in the direction of waggishness, by which the housewife tries to show that she has been around. The underwriters, most often men, work in clipped, winded sentences, as though they were perpetually climbing a flight of stairs. Their writing is colorless, lifeless, and without movement or interest, though they are mindful only of action and plot. If they are literate, they imitate Hemingway or his more popular imitators; if not, they draw on their native inability, with no appreciable difference in the result. Occasionally, one encounters a piece of hermaphroditic writing, which unites the worst features of both. The mistakes underlying these wretched styles are simple (the basic trouble is always a failure to feel; only a felt experience can be rendered exactly and expressively, without the artificial excess or deficiency of the style), but they are, as I say, very difficult to treat. The most effective treatment, and the one which would do writing courses and the students who remain in them the most good,

would be to eliminate the bad writers from the class, or not to let them enter in the first place. My proposal is more merciful than it sounds. The bad writers never become better than mediocre, no matter how many courses they take.

THIS WOULD BE the ideal solution, as it would enable the few whose writing can be improved to proceed without hindrance from their inferiors; and the instructor, freed of the hopeless cases, would be able to devote more time to the educable. It is most unlikely that such a reform will ever be instituted on a large scale, as writing classes are conducted for a profit. But short of this drastic step, I fail to see what can be done to make courses in writing useful to the public.

I am aware that this is hardly the manner in which the general improvement of education should be undertaken. In ordinary classes, reform can be gentler and more gradual, and can be carried out by an improvement of texts or study methods, to say nothing of the faculty. But classes in the arts, writing among them, are not ordinary, and ought never to be presented as such. There is one very important respect in which writing classes are different: one cannot admit the existence of a middling group of students, neither the best nor the worst, without endangering the aesthetic standards such courses must preserve. An ex-

ample will make clear what I mean.

We ordinarily assume that a class of students, whatever the subject, will fall into three main groups of ability: the few very brightest, the few very poorest, and the relatively large middle group, neither the best nor the worst. As a rule, this is a perfectly workable division, and the grades (whether calculated absolutely or on a normal distribution curve) bear it out, giving as fair a measure of ability as grades can provide. But where the ability cannot be exactly quantified — which is always the case in the arts — the usual assumption governing the composition of a class turns out to be nonsense. Suppose we are grading a group of girls on their ability to dance like Pavlova. We shall not get the usual three groups, of those who do very well, well enough, and very poorly. There will be only two groups — those who do dance as well as Pavlova (for the sake of argument, let there be at least one girl) — and all the rest. For aesthetic purposes, the middle group does not exist; it is the same as the tail-end group in that it is not the best. Now since I am arguing for the elimination of the very worst students, discouraging the best from wasting their time, and denying that it makes sense to speak of a middle

group, it follows that there cannot be any writing classes at all!

THIS, TOO, would be an ideal solution. But since courses in writing will continue regardless of the arguments in favor of stopping them, I am willing to offer a compromise. These are the provisions: that it be stated at the outset that writing cannot be taught, though it can, to some extent (depending on the student's gift) be learned; that the difference between courses in writing, and courses in non-aesthetic subjects be preserved and everything possible be done to maintain aesthetic standards; that the writing classes be prevented from contributing to the debasement of language by their disregard of these standards; that a middle group be carefully selected, to include none of the very best or the very worst; that the class be small in number; that it be conducted, not for a profit, but as a service to the deserving, the loss to be covered by proceeds from classes where one need not be so discriminating, and in which enrollment can be unrestricted; and that the class be made up of people who are willing to study, to learn, even to live as writers, with humility and delight in their hard work, and who are not afraid to write from the heart.

# BOOKS

William Phillips

## *The Wholeness of Literature*

Edmund Wilson's Essays

THE SHORES OF LIGHT,\* a new collection of reviews, sketches, and short essays by Edmund Wilson, is very impressive — not so much for the value of the individual pieces, though most of them are first-rate, as for the sense of Wilson's total achievement conveyed by them. The book does not include most of Wilson's longer writings; yet these short and occasional pieces display all the qualities that have made Wilson one of our most respected literary critics: an over-all range of interest and sensibility, a kind of stubborn consistency and integrity, and a remarkable gift for exposition. Some of our other leading critics — like Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, Robert Penn Warren, or John Crowe Ransom — to mention only a few —

have made notable contributions to the study of specific literary areas and problems. Wilson's bent, however, in a way like that of Lionel Trilling, Newton Arvin, or even T. S. Eliot, is in a somewhat different direction, bringing him closer to the traditional image of the critic, the man of letters who comments freely on life and literature and relates himself to the experience, ideas, and social forces of his time.

Wilson's achievement stands out particularly in a period of creeping specialization, such as ours, when every cubbyhole is made into a career. I do not mean to disparage all forms of specialization; obviously, much of our best work has been done by specialists. Still, the narrowing of interests to the point where scientists know nothing about literature, writers know nothing

\* THE SHORES OF LIGHT. By EDMUND WILSON. Farrar, Straus. 832 pp. \$6.50.