A LETTER TO MY STUDENTS (1984)*

It seems to be something of the destiny of our strange kind that we are predisposed—unlike those whom Auden called "Our Silent Betters"—to justify our actions and endeavors on some sort of "moral" (though the word so frequently becomes a euphemism for precisely its opposite) plane. Teachers of "Creative Writing" (or the sheer, uncensored cacaphony that presently passes for such) might find themselves particularly needful of doing so these days, as they are frequently under attack—and no doubt at times rightfully—by their peers, their colleagues, their administrators and, yes, even their students for performing it badly. Being one of those who likes to feel at least a modicum of purpose in what he is about to undertake, and faced—as we, together, are about to be—with an endeavor that contains a good likelihood of resulting in at least stalemate, if not downright failure, I too would like, for a moment, to bare that small portion of my soul which I seem to have access to and ask the simple question: "Why are we here?"

I remember years ago, even before I thought of myself as a "real" poet, being struck by the words in Lawrence Durrell's beautiful novel *Justine* which describe poetry as "a clumsy attempt at the artificial insemination of the Muses." Accepting, for a moment, Durrell's admittedly tongue-in-cheek definition as more than just an expression of novelistic envy at the poet's sparseness and precision, one might be lead from it to define a Creative Writing class, then, as something of a sperm bank—and one not necessarily with Nobel Prize-winning sperm at that! Indeed, given a time when the previously mysterious machinations of fertility are becoming as much the domain of the laboratory as the bedroom, I see no reason to expect that so hopefully lofty an art as poetry should be spared its quota of clinically engineered conceptions—and miscarriages—as well. Yet, our penchant for craft, technique and control of all sorts notwithstanding, it seems, miraculously, that genuine births of the wet, messy, laborious and unpredictable sort still have a place in our lives, and may even lay claim to that elusive, risky and life-affirming epithet we call "art." Every once in a while, gratefully, the genuine thing still groans its way out of the lab and into the bedroom, and—poof!—a poem, miraculously, emerges.

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* Editor's Note: Blumenthal was the Briggs-Copeland Lecturer in Poetry at Harvard University when this letter first appeared in the *AWP Newsletter*, February, 1984.

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Yet, there is, I believe, a rather basic and unlovely truth about the massive rise in the teaching—and studying—of Creative Writing in recent years, and we might do best to unburden ourselves of it at the outset (repentance always providing, as it does, a useful aperitif to self-congratulations): For one, there are just *too many* of us writers around, and (no differently from the plethora of lawyers, potters, therapists, ornithologists and welders) we need something to do—preferably something that will provide our families with a decent breakfast and us with a bit of fun and a reprieve from writing *even more* poetry to boot. Secondly, as Auden observed, "in our age, if a young person is untalented, the odds are in favor of his imagining the wants to write . . . A high percentage of those without any marked talent for *any* profession think of writing as the solution." (emphasis mine). This too, seems perfectly logical to me, as, for writers, signs—and confessions—of failure have, by definition, a far longer "latency" period than for other professions . . . and, of course, there is always posterity!

So what to do! Well, like those in many other professions, we take advantage of our sheer excess in numbers to confer, advise, praise, damn, defer, intimidate, teach, review and patronize one another, while —in our nobler moments—holding to the faint hope that out of this frenzy of pursuits may yet emerge something that will ennoble, rather than further mechanize and freneticize, our lives.

The results thus far, I would submit, are somewhat discouraging, if not downright depressing. From what I can tell, even most poets—in private moments of candor—will confess that their primary reaction to reading most of the not-inappropriately-called "little" magazines these days is an overwhelming concern for the future for the forests. Nor am I so overcome by *hubris* as to suppose, though one always like to hope, that my own work is exempt from the general situation I am describing. But one's own work—insofar as its literary merit is concerned—is for others, finally, to judge. Like, I suspect, most poets and writers, I have all too often found that what seemed to me like last year's genius has survived only to emerge in print as this year's embarrassment.

But perhaps I am straying a bit too far from the real subject of this small talk to you who are about to become my students—namely, *"Why are we here?"* There are, of course, superficial reasons to begin with: I applied, and was asked to come, and you, no doubt, need the credits. Nor can I disguise the fact that it is no small satisfaction for a first generation ghetto boy like myself to be asked to teach at a university he could never have gotten into, and to be paid a pretty decent sum for doing so as well . . . with summers off! But, like most humans, I like to flatter myself with at least the illusions of merit and high purpose, and so suspect that—along with the usual motives of vanity, pride, will to

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power, economic need and just plain boredom—there may also be nobler motives lurking here.

Let me continue on a note, perhaps, of disturbing realism: I strongly doubt—indeed, if it weren't against my own best interests to do so, I might even bet—that whether or not any of you become "true" poets will have anything to do with what happens in this, or any other, creative writing class. Whether poets are born—whether biology or character, or both, is destiny—I don't know, but I am fairly certain that, if they are made, it is with the grace of the gods and not in English Section C, or at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference. I think that the most I, or any teacher, can do for you as a poet is to simply give you some tools and encourage you to obey Emerson's most difficult imperative: "Insist on yourself; never imitate."

Saul Bellow once defined writers as "readers inspired to emulation." But now—as writing programs and classes and their progeny of magazines and networks of friendships, plaudits and romance spread over the land like the plague itself—the danger clearly presents itself that those who might have been inspired to *emulation* by the Shakespeares and Wordsworths and Spensers and Hardys of another time may now be inspired to *imitation* by the omnipresent Smiths, Joneses, Greens—and, yes, Blumenthals—of this one, that our students, as Philip Levine has pointed out, are tempted "to steal pebbles, when they should be stealing diamonds." For if the price of democracy in the arts is not, as Stanley Kunitz suggests, universal mediocrity, it is, at the very least, universal inundation—and it becomes more and more difficult to pull the diamonds from beneath the rubble.

It was Eliot who, on this subject, said that good poets borrow, whereas great ones steal. But he forgot, I think, to say that extraordinary poets *invent*, and that the greatest possible service any teacher can perform for his students is to urge them towards—or, at least, keep them from straying too far from—the sources of their own invention. The poet's ultimate business, it seems to me, is neother to make sense nor to make harmony of this life (though try he must), but to make music. Sense and harmony, insofar as they exist in this world, are the work of the gods. But music is the work of the poets, and—to quote an old Gospel tune—"God bless," in that regard, "the child that's got his own."

Many of you will, no doubt, (though hopeful not in any great rush) go on from here to publish poems, books, reviews and—like the author of the present *mea culpa*—teach and write references for the next

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generation of aspiring Byrons and Wordsworths and Dickinsons and Millays. Like the present-day, so-called "new," school of Balinese painters, many of you will learn and practice enough of the craft (the easier part) of your art (the more difficult) to peddle your wares successfully in that marketplace which—in the ever-treacherous and ever-beckoning present—will provide the immediate, and often distorted, measure of your achievements.

But whatever true success we—any of us—have as poets, I can assure you, will be a more private, a far more lonely, a more profound and—one likes, a least, to hope—a more enduring one: namely, the ability, from within the profoundest solitude of your own voices and hearts, to sing into being that portion of a man or woman's life which, as Albert Schweitzer observed, so tragically and so frequently dies while he or she is still alive—an openness of the passions and intellect, a fervor for justice and significance, a love and piety towards both the natural and the human world, and an unrelenting desire—however painful—to address one's personal truths and demons. No one has ever said it better than Eliot himself (in "East Coker"):

> In order to arrive at what you do not know
> You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
> In order to possess what you do not possess
> You must go by way of dispossession.
> In order to arrive at what you are not
> You must go through the way in which you are not.
> And what you do not know is the only thing you know
> And what you own is what you do not own
> And where you are is where you are not.

Poetry, as Paul Valery observed, is the inextricable mingling of individual feelings and general requirements. About the latter, hopefully, we can learn, and teach one another, something here . . . and about the fact that when language ceases to be infused with meaning, profound seriousness *and* profound playfulness, life ceases to be so as well. As Tadeusz Różewicz, the great Polish poet, has observed:

> To write in our times
> you have to delimit compromise isolate
> deafen yourself
> people used to write from an excess
> today from a lack

But the deep core of feeling, hope, suffering, passion and joy from which the tones of each poet's personal music tremble into being must be "learned"—if learned they be—in a workshop more exacting, more mysterious and far more difficult than the one we are about to embark

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on here, and remains now as it has always been—blessed, unasked-for, unteachable, and urged by each individual's hidden gods into such music the very sound of which can make the listener tremble with his own humanness and the miraculousness of having been here.

There are many dangers, I think, in addition to those I have already mentioned, that present themselves to young poets these days. The present insipid, prurient, voyeuristic and mean-spirited obsession with the details of poets' private lives, for example—the failed marriages, homosexualities, infidelities, alcoholisms, suicides, madnesses and depressions which (if the truth be known) characterize the lives of far less gifted individuals as well—have created for the incipient poet a "model" of the poet which emphasizes hysteria, flamboyance and betrayal at the expense of the far more noteworthy, though less marketable, efforts at penance, purgation and redemption that characterize the very same lives. Not only does this gravely distort, and do great injustice to, the poets involved, but—even more dangerously—it permits, in the eyes and minds of the young and impressionable, a mistaken substitution of the theatrical for the profound, the maudin for the tragic, and the superficial incident for the profoundly meaningful struggle.

John Berryman is a case in point. When one compares, for example, the public curiosity and the attention devoted to his infidelities, depression and suicide with the attention that *ought* to be given to such brutally courageous lines as:

> Am I a bad man? Am I a good man?
> —Hard to say, Brother Bones. Maybe you both,
> like most of we.

We can see again how the mythical blending of personal hysteria with poetic creation serves to eclipse the issues of poetic and personal courage and integrity which would make a far more interesting—though decidedly less sensational—subject. Yet imagine, if you will, a society whose acknowledged political and moral leaders had the courage to ask themselves such questions . . . Imagine Ronald Reagan.

As the poet McKeel McBride has pointed out in a recent essay in *Seneca Review*, it is much the same story with the harmful and insidious assumption that pain, suffering, betrayal, disappointment and death are more appropriate breeding grounds for poetic inspiration than are affirmation and joy. For, though one can certainly agree with Dylan Thomas that at all our sheets goes the same crooked worm, it is at least equally as true, with Whitman, that "a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels," and that an infinitude of such miracles, along with the darkness, surrounds us at any given moment. Though death awaits us all, we ought to remind ourselves—and our students

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—with equal zeal that life does also. Though betrayals will be ours, no doubt, in droves, so will moments of genuine love. And though we shall surely perpetrate, and receive, our share of injustices and hurts, the paths of both repentance and forgiveness are always open to us. William Meredith, in his wonderful poem "The Cheer," goes right to the heart of the matter:

> Certainly good cheer has never been what's wrong,
> though solemn people mistrust it.
> Against evil, between evils, lovely words are right.
> How absurd it would be to spin these noises out,
> so serious that we call them poems,
> if they couldn't make a person smile.

Wallace Stevens, whom I admire more for his poetic gifts than for the consistency of his philosophical insights, wrote, I believe wrongly, that "if there is anything concerning poetry about which people agree it is that the role of the poet is *not* to be found in morals." (emphasis mine) I'm not sure exactly whom Stevens had in mind as his chorus here, but I count myself as definitely not among them. Rather, I would submit that, behind *every* great poem—from Homer to Wordsworth, from Pope to Eliot, from Chaucer to Stevens himself—lies the impetus towards moral insight and education through the sacrament of language, the implicit belief that through mysteries of poetic utterance the poet transcends the psychological remedy of self acceptance and begins the far more difficult—and profoundly *moral*—movement towards *self transformation* in which the seeker finds the source of his growth and salvation. In fact, when Stevens tells us, elsewhere, that the poet's role is "to help people live their lives" it is precisely in *moral* terms that he casts the poet's task, and the reader's. And, I would suggest to you as well, that—if somewhere buried deep beneath the surface of your own poems there is not a similar urge towards the moral, in fact toward the divine—no matter how practiced our craft, no matter how nurtured our intelligence, no matter how clever our wit—our poems will, at their very birth, be doomed—perhaps, first, to be published—but, ultimately, to be ignored.

All this, perhaps too long-windedly, is by way of trying to answer, for myself, the question I first posed: *"Why are we here?"* We are here, I would suggest to you, because—as Howard Nemerov has said in speaking of Randall Jarrell—"the beautiful is still among the possible," and because the beautiful may still be one, if not the only, way towards a vision—a peculiarly *human* vision—of the good and the moral. We are here, I think, because somewhere within us resides the hope that, by making music, we may—perhaps, to our own surprise—create beauty,

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and because "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." We are here, I assume, because we share the hope that—be it by accident or by guile, by gift or by discipline, by craft or by luck, by hard work or by divine destiny—some among us may yet utter such "iridescences and fantastic shapes,"[1] such strange, lovely and magical syllables, that our sufferings *and* our joys may yet be redeemed and the cacophony that has become modern life transmuted—if only for a moment—into such a beautiful music that even our wickedness and our failures may pause for an instant to dance in that blessed air.

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[1] From Howard Nemerov, "The Measure of Poetry."

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