

From
The Writer's Chronicle
October/November 2009

Remembering Paul Engle
By Mike Chasar

On December 4-5, 1959, the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and *Esquire* magazine co-sponsored a symposium that brought Ralph Ellison, Mark Harris, Dwight Macdonald and Norman Mailer to the Iowa City campus, which was then called the State University of Iowa. This was the second such event that Arnold Gingrich—publisher and founding editor of *Esquire*—had organized. The previous year, he'd arranged for Saul Bellow, Leslie Fiedler, Wright Morris and Dorothy Parker to meet at Columbia University in New York in order to discuss "The Position of the Writer in America Today." A year later, under the somewhat narrowed rubric of "The Writer in a Mass Culture," Gingrich and longtime Writers' Workshop Director Paul Engle welcomed audiences to the prairie, opening an event that had been pitched to the press in functional, decidedly prosaic language. "Four distinct statements of the problem," the release read, "will be made by four widely published writers who have faced the constant issues of art and the market place." (1)

In New York, Wright Morris had spoken of the "mindless society" into which he saw United States writers introducing their work, and Mark Harris's leadoff speech in 1959 picked up where Morris let off, setting the stage early for a wholesale, broad-stroked denunciation of mass culture from the perspective of highbrow art and literature. "Art and mass distribution are simply incompatible," Harris began. "The writer has no business reaching for a mass audience and the serious reader has no business distracting the writer by discussing with him possible methods of bridging the gulf between the writer and the mass—it cannot be bridged." (2) Harris went on to make several proposals which he felt would improve the situation of the literary arts in the United States, including a drastic reduction in the number of books published each year, the subsidizing of presses by wealthy foundations, and "the creation of a bureau of pure books and standards, whose role would not be censorship nor repression, but education and clarification." (3) Nor was Harris above naming names. "Let us declare once and forever ..., " he implored, "Edgar Guest was never a poet." (4)

While the symposium would go on to nuance the terms of Harris's opening remarks, neither Macdonald nor Mailer would challenge his general depiction of mass culture. Macdonald, who published his famous essay "Masscult and Midcult" in the *Partisan Review* a year later, lamented the lack of a "cultivated class" in the United States which he saw in England and answered that "the serious writer has to ... write for his peers." (5) Calling mass culture "a dreadful thing," Mailer went on (as only Mailer himself could have, perhaps) to

ratchet up the rhetoric by saying, “I consider it a war, I consider the mass media really as if I were living with a cancerous wife and each day I have to see her all the time and she gives me a bit of her cancer. That is about the way I feel about the mass media.” (6) Only Ellison argued for a more sophisticated position. “A democracy,” he cautioned, “is not just a mass, it is a collectivity of individuals. And when it comes to taste, when it comes to art, each and every one of these people must have the right, the opportunity, to develop his taste and must face the same type of uncertainty which all of us face on this platform.” (7)

In the symposium’s transcript, however, Paul Engle is silent on these matters. On one level, this silence is completely understandable; as moderator, his job was to conduct the speeches, referee the Q&A period that followed, and specifically not inject his own feelings on the subject. On another level, however, his silence is more provocative. For Engle—the man who had been directing the prestigious Writers’ Workshop for seventeen years, who had brought John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Kurt Vonnegut to Iowa City to teach, who would mentor writers like Robert Bly, Philip Levine, Donald Justice, and Flannery O’Connor, and who would go on to lead the program for almost another decade—was not only at that precise moment placing his poetry in publications such as *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Better Homes & Gardens*, and *Reader’s Digest* magazines. But he was writing poems for Hallmark greeting cards as well.

* * * * *

Paul Hamilton Engle was born on October 12, 1908, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa—the state’s second largest city, located 25 miles north of Iowa City, and home at the time to the American regionalist painter Grant Wood. In 2008, Engle would have turned 100. He came from a farming family of German descent. His parents, Thomas and Evelyn, ran a horse business, buying, selling, training, and renting race horses, work horses, and saddle horses; for a time, they operated the Engles Riding Academy (“Learn the Thrill of Riding Horseback” one of the business’s documents reads). Both of his grandfathers were Civil War veterans—a significant enough mark of distinction for Engle to have included it on one of his resumes. (8) That same resume reports that Paul helped with the family business, sold newspapers, and worked at a drug store and as a chauffeur and gardener while still in school. He went to McKinley Junior High School in Cedar Rapids where, Vince Clemente reports, his art teacher was none other than Grant Wood (9); then he attended Washington High School (which was Wood’s alma mater) where he served as his class’s designated poet, penning “Dedication Poem Read at the Planting of the Cedar by the Class of 1927”—a verse that was “buried in a bottle under a new-planted class tree in schoolyard.” (10) While a copy of that poem has survived (it’s included among Engle’s papers in the University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections Department), the sapling didn’t fare as well. Engle wryly comments on his resume, “Tree died.” In other words, *ars longus, vita brevis*.

Engle graduated from Coe College in Cedar Rapids in 1931, preached for a time at Stumptown church “on edge of town,” and might have entered the ministry were it not for the fact that he “heard no call” (11); nevertheless, he would return to religious themes throughout his career in poems like “Easter,” which ran in *Better Homes & Gardens* in April of 1960 and which begins:

From the dead winter comes
 Live season of rebirth,
 The old, gray rain now falls
 To green the turning earth.

Christ once in that dim time
 Brought life and light to men,
 Hold of their hope: to die
 Once, and be born again. (12)

He completed an M.A. from Iowa in 1932, submitting a manuscript of poems (*One Slim Feather*) that would become his first book, *Worn Earth*, to fulfill the thesis requirement. The same year, Stephen Vincent Benet—the “middlebrow” poet who would make the same award to James Agee in 1934 and Muriel Rukeyser in 1935—would select *Worn Earth* as the winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize.

Engle spent 1933-36 in Oxford, England, as a Rhodes Scholar. There, in addition to playing wicket keeper on the Merton College cricket team and rowing well enough in the College eights to compete in the International Regattas at Marlowe and Henley on the Thames, (13) he also found time—improbable as it might seem—to publish in *The New Masses*, the explicitly Marxist journal which strongly promoted the policies of the Communist Party; Engle’s poem “Maxim Gorky” appeared December 29, 1936. According to Joseph Wilson, British poets W.H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, and Stephen Spender expressed “disapproval” at Engle’s sporting endeavors, and, in the 1950s, the Marxist sentiments expressed in “Maxim Gorky” and elsewhere got Engle pegged “as a possible member of the Communist front,” though he never faced the sort of scrutiny from the House Un-American Activities Committee that writers like Langston Hughes or George Oppen faced. (14)

Upon his return to the States in 1937, Engle was invited to join the University of Iowa’s English Department faculty as a poetry lecturer. He was appointed acting director of the Writers’ Workshop in 1941 when Workshop founder and then-director Wilbur Schramm left to serve in the military. At the time, the Workshop was part of the English Department and had been since the Workshop’s establishment in 1936. Today, when a Workshop student takes a literature class, he or she typically does not do so in the English Department; in a separation emblematic of the rift between creative artists and scholars at the university level, the Workshop now boasts its own full-time faculty, occupies its own building (the newly-renovated Dey House), and offers its own courses open only to Workshop students and taught only by creative writing faculty. In the mid 1960s, an administrative rift compounded by personality conflicts in the English Department and Workshop precipitated this split at Iowa and eventually led to Engle’s departure. (This controversy is detailed in the only history of the Workshop to date, Stephen Wilbers’s *The Iowa Writers’ Workshop: Origins, Emergence, & Growth*. [15]) In 1941, and at the time of “The Writer in a Mass Culture” in 1959, though, that split was still a long way from happening.

Engle would direct the Workshop until 1965, and it was during his tenure that the program gained much of the international reputation and cultural prestige that it now

enjoys. In 2003, the Workshop received a National Humanities Medal from the National Endowment for the Humanities, only the first such award given to a university and the second to an institution. The university has recently taken to branding itself “The Writing University,” and there is a concerted effort afoot to get Iowa City designated by UNESCO as the world’s second “City of Literature” on par with Edinburgh, Scotland. (16) (“This is the place,” explained International Writing Program Director Christopher Merrill, “where great writing begins.”) Engle hired Nelson Algren, Berryman, Lowell, Philip Roth, Mark Strand, Vonnegut, and others to teach in Iowa City. During the same time, the program graduated literary luminaries such as Bly, Justice, Levine, O’Connor (who dedicated her M.F.A. thesis to Engle), W.D. Snodgrass, William Stafford, and Charles Wright. Count the Pulitzer Prizes if you can. Engle was also, and more crucially perhaps, a skilled administrator and fund-raiser, acquiring a large amount of support from corporations and foundations (Wilson puts the figure at over \$500,000) to make the program *the* preeminent—and, it is important to say, the most frequently imitated—creative writing program in the United States

When Engle left his position, it was to then co-found—with his second wife, the Chinese-born novelist Hualing Nieh Engle—the International Writing Program, which is still operated out of the University and headquartered across the street from the Workshop on the northeast corner of campus. In 2007, the I.W.P. celebrated its fortieth anniversary. Engle was instrumental in getting start-up money from the United States Information Agency, which was then sponsoring the Fulbright Scholarship Program and Voice of America broadcasts, and purportedly raised over \$2 million to fund the I.W.P. (17) Since 1967, the I.W.P. has succeeded in bringing over 1,000 publishing writers from over 120 countries to Iowa City, giving them time to write, study, and engage in cross-cultural dialogue; in the 2006-07 academic year alone, the program hosted over 30 individuals from over 25 countries. For their work on the I.W.P., Paul and Hualing were nominated for a Nobel Prize in 1976.

Engle retired in 1977, and there is not much recorded or publicly available information on how he spent those years. He died in O’Hare Airport in March of 1991 while traveling to Poland to accept that government’s Order of Merit. He has been described as “charming, difficult, cantankerous, demanding, generous, cold and reserved, warm and open, a man of so many contradictions it would be presumptuous ... to resolve them.” (18) One thing is for certain, however, and that’s the influence he had in establishing the University of Iowa as a national center of literary activity. Before I arrived in Iowa City in 2002, an English Department faculty member told me that you couldn’t swing a dead cat in town without hitting a writer, and she was right. Engle is a major reason for that fact, and he has become so much the mythical figure—one current administrator referred to him as “the loveable curmudgeon genius founder”—that many people mistakenly assume that he founded the Workshop that he led for so long. Indeed, Wilson’s short biography of Engle in *American Poets, 1880-1945* claims that Engle’s “impact has been felt in three areas [poetry writing, the Writers’ Workshop, and the I.W.P.], any one of which would have been an entire career for someone less determined and energetic.” (19) “True,” wrote Vince Clemente more recently, “there is no escaping Paul Engle.” (20)

The thing about memory, however, is that it is always selective; we—and our institutions, including our institutions of higher learning—remember what we most want to

remember, what most confirms our present sense of who we are and what we do. In an age of creative writing professionalism, and in an age when Dana Gioia (Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts), John Barr (President of the Poetry Foundation), and others can blame the reduced presence of poetry in public discourse in part on careerist, back-scratching, insular M.F.A. programs like that at Iowa, what would it mean to remember Engle not just as a teacher of Levine, Bly and O'Connor, but as a writer of verse for *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Better Homes & Gardens* as well? What would it mean to rediscover that the Writers' Workshop was, in fact, established by a religious poet who contributed topical and occasional verse to publications like the *New Masses*, not to mention to local newspapers like the *Des Moines Register* and the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*? What would it mean to our sense of the M.F.A. degree and its mission if its model program boasted a director who not only wrote poetry for Hallmark greeting cards, but who did so by consciously imitating the verse of none other than Edgar A. Guest—

I'd like to be the sort of friend
 that you have been to me,
 I'd like to be the help that you are always
 glad to be,
 I'd like to mean as much to you each minute
 of the day
 As you have meant, Good Friend of Mine, to
 me along the way;
 I'm wishing at this special time that I
 could but repay
 A portion of the gladness that you've strewn
 along my way
 And could I have one wish this year this
 only would it be
 I'd like to be the sort of friend that you
 have been to me!

—the very same Edgar A. Guest whom Mark Harris in 1959 exhorted us to “declare once and forever ... was never a poet”?

* * * * *

The first poem I ever read by Engle was “American Child: 3,” which appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal* in January of 1945. It's a variation on a Petrarchan sonnet (rhyming abab cdcd efg efg) and part of a sonnet sequence that Engle was busy writing, expanding, and publishing between 1944 and 1956. Published as *American Child: A Sonnet Sequence* by Random House in 1945, then reprinted by The Dial Press with an additional 36 poems as *American Child: Sonnets for My Daughters*, the string of poems had a social life beyond these volumes as well. Richard B. Weber's “Paul Engle: A Checklist” informs us that eleven of the sonnets were printed locally in an edition of 300 at The Prairie Press of Muscatine, Iowa, in

1944, and others appeared individually in an eclectic mix of mass circulation periodicals and “little magazines” including *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, *Life*, and *Mademoiselle*. (21)

I personally didn’t come across “American Child: 3” in any of these places, however. Rather, I found it in a poetry scrapbook assembled by Joyce Fitzgerald, a young woman who was collecting and pasting all manner of verse into the “Authorized Edition” of her *Shirley Temple Scrap Book* during World War II. (22) On those mass-marketed pages, Fitzgerald—who was taking part in the widespread though seldom-explored United States practice of poetry scrapbooking that had structured Americans’ reading practices since the mid nineteenth century—mixes Engle’s piece with clippings by well-known and even “literary” writers such Louis Untermeyer, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, and Robert P. Tristram Coffin (who received the 1936 Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his collection *Strange Holiness*) as well as an equal number of “lowbrow” verses by unknown, sentimental poets, and even childish pieces like Una Phyllis Dod’s “Snippity-Snee” which begins: “Doggy and Pony and me / Met in a field of clover; / We met a lambkin by a tree, / When the day was over.” Fitzgerald includes newspaper and periodical images alongside political poems about the war in Europe, religious poems about pacifist responses to American military intervention, and even a poem advertisement issued by the Maine Highway Safety Campaign. She also reserves a special place in the *Shirley Temple Scrap Book* for the work of young women poets and poetry-readers like herself. In fact, she includes a poem called “Stars Through the Perilous Night” first written for a high school history class and then published by a 17 year-old Carolyn Kizer, whose name should be familiar to readers of *The Writers’ Chronicle*; indeed, Kizer would grow up to receive the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1985. Her work has appeared in these very pages and—yes—she even taught for a time at the Writers’ Workshop.

I bring up Fitzgerald’s personal anthology—and Engle’s place in it—not to read “American Child: 3” in particular, but to read Engle’s poem alongside “The Writer in a Mass Culture” and in the broader literary context of its times. While Harris, Macdonald, and Mailer would have had a difficult time understanding the legitimacy of Fitzgerald’s brow-crossing scrapbook and its mass cultural origins, I think that it would have made perfect sense to Ellison and Engle alike, both of whom understood that “when it comes to taste, when it comes to art, each and every one of these people must have the right, the opportunity, to develop his taste and must face the same type of uncertainty which all of us face on this platform.” Engle, who could publish in *Poetry* magazine and hire Lowell to teach at the Writers’ Workshop while drumming up ideas for Hallmark at the same time, understood, I think, the importance and potential of a range of poetries engaging with United States culture—mass culture included—and opted for that model of the author’s involvement in everyday life rather than the firm and steadfast separation from the “mindless society” that Harris, Macdonald, and Mailer were advocating in 1959 and that many writing programs, by virtue of their unflagging emphasis on the “literary,” encourage today. Indeed, in an essay he was drafting in the late 1950s (then titled “The Need for Poetry”), Engle wrote, “In our age of mass communication, it is poetry which steadily asserts the need for individual communication. Of all the arts, it is poetry which most exactly deals with the life of the self in its dailiest daily ways.” (23) Nor was this an idea that

he would soon abandon. His drafts for “Why Read Poetry?”—which appear to be from the mid 60s—similarly call for the poet’s engagement with his or her culture. “If poetry, as I have said earlier,” he writes, referring to the political poetry of John Milton and Percy Shelley, “is a whole life experience put intensely into words, then the poet must be a whole person, and it is for that reason that he cannot be an aloof individual cutting himself off from the rest of the world.” (24)

Insofar as Engle—and Fitzgerald for that matter—saw no inherent contradiction between highbrow art and Hallmark art, their views weren’t particularly unusual for their time. A small group of poetry scholars including Cary Nelson, Joan Shelley Rubin, and Mark W. Van Wienen has shown over the past decade and a half that American readers regularly read poetry as part of their daily lives, even though it was not always the work by avant-garde or Modernist authors whom we teach and study today. “While scholars have segregated ‘high’ and ‘popular’ modernists from nineteenth-century romantics and authors of sentimental verse,” Rubin writes, ordinary readers in the United States felt free to range widely “across intellectual levels” and, as such, “became, over time, repositories of both the high and the popular—aware of, but not constrained by, a shifting boundary between them.” (25) In *Partisans and Poets: The Political Work of American Poetry in the Great War*, Van Wienen describes the democratic “embeddedness” of poetry in American culture and the multitude of uses to which it was regularly put. “[M]any of these poems,” he explains, “were written by amateur poets—people who may have read, written, and published poetry regularly but who did not or could not take poetry to be their occupation.” (26) That poetry saturated everyday American life, appearing in daily newspapers, magazines, scrapbooks, autograph books, classrooms, songbooks and advertisements, on the radio, billboards, broadsides, and Chautauqua circuits, and on a host of ephemeral consumer goods ranging from postcards to calling cards, playing cards, matchbooks, posters, calendars, stickers, menus, magic lantern slides, pin-ups, and souvenir pillows, handkerchiefs, and table runners. Indeed, looking at “Stars Through the Perilous Night” in Fitzgerald’s scrapbook, or at “Dedication Poem Read at the Planting of the Cedar by the Class of 1927,” one is tempted to conclude that Kizer and Engle were two such “amateur” poets who happened to become professional ones as well.

Although I have no evidence to prove it, I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that Engle succeeded in securing funding for the Writers’ Workshop (and the I.W.P. for that matter) in large part not because he painted a picture of a dream program that would remove poetry from mass circulation and daily life, but because he could talk to people *across* brow lines about poetry’s importance to everyday life. If poetry, as he believed, is the genre that most “steadily asserts the need for individual communication,” then it would not be hard to imagine how, in an age of mass culture’s increasing homogenization and standardization of daily life, it would seem all the more imperative to him to inject that mass culture with as much verse as possible and trust, like Ellison, in the capacity of American readers “to develop his taste and ... face the same type of uncertainty which all of us face on this platform”—not just in the ivory tower or in the halls of academe but in the “dailiest daily” parts of our lives.

* * * * *

Here is “American Child: 3,” in its entirety, as it appeared in *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1945, four months before the end of World War II in Europe and nearly eight months before the Allied victory in the Pacific:

Lucky the living child born in a land
 Bordered by rivers of enormous flow:
 Missouri running through its throat of sand,
 Mississippi growling under snow;
 A country confident that day or night,
 Planting, plowing or at evening rest
 It has a trust like childhood, free of fright,
 Having such powers to hold it east and west.
 Water edged with willow gray or green
 Edges the hours and meadows where she plays.
 Where the black earth and the bright time are piled,
 She lives between those rivers as between
 Her birth and death, and is in these bold days
 A water-watched and river-radiant child. (27)

Despite the provocative Anglo-Saxon alliteration and four-beat lines underlying the sonnet’s pentameter, “American Child: 3” is, by most literary standards, a failure. Imagine, for a moment, the types of responses it might elicit in an M.F.A. writing workshop today: it’s full of what Ezra Pound in “A Retrospect” (1918) called the “painted adjectives” characteristic of outmoded genteel or sentimental verse (28); it hardly goes “in fear of abstraction” (birth, death, childhood, trust, fright, etc.) as M.F.A. programs—again following Pound’s lead, this time in “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” (1913)—would advise (29); it almost aggressively violates the “show don’t tell” mantra of institutionally-taught writing. Its inverted syntax (“with willow gray or green”); its impulse toward didacticism; its suggestion that the United States is in some way “innocent” and that such isolation from the social is, in fact, desirable: these things and more appear to strip the poem of its “literary” character, what Terry Eagleton would call “its material density” (30) and what Jerome McGann would describe as its linguistic “thickness”—that is, the “self-reflection and self-generation” that is borne of the “ambiguities and paradoxes of texts.” (31) Indeed, Engle’s detractors have called his verse “painstakingly derivative” and “pompous” (32) and—in language that would seem to have anticipated Mark Harris’s dismissal of Edgar Guest along the same lines in 1959—Malcolm Cowley characterized Engle as an “orator” and “not a poet at all.” (33)

From another perspective, however, “American Child: 3” is hardly a failure. In employing the poeticisms of sentimental verse that would doom it to failure in other, more literary contexts—that is, in engaging the discourse of popular poetry in ways that Lowell or Berryman could not or would not—Engle attempts to purchase a more serious discussion with mass cultural audiences about the sources of patriotism and the nature of national identity during wartime. For “American Child: 3” is nothing if not a wartime poem, emphasizing and celebrating the power and plenty of the “land” and “country” that is

protected by “such powers” in the “bold days” of the 1940s. At the same time, however, in fulfilling the conventions of the patriotic poem form, Engle’s point of departure—what amounts to the thesis of his poem—troubles the assumptions behind those very conventions and their ideals. Its first, didactic line, “Lucky the living child born in a land,” relies on the alliteration of the unnecessary word “living” in order to highlight the radical contingency of national identity and material privilege posited in the poem’s first word “Lucky.” Indeed, at a time when national claims to morality and righteousness were reaching a fever pitch in American wartime propaganda and mass cultural organs, Engle—with an international scope not entirely unexpected, coming as it does from the future founder of the I.W.P.—reminds his readers that those claims are not inherent, not god-given, but the product of circumstance. The American child, his poem argues, is no better or worse than other children around the world simply by virtue of being American, just luckier; lucky, too, is the nation, edged and protected by the Atlantic and the Pacific just as the child “lives between” the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, but no more or less better than other nations solely because of that fact.

Written at a time of mass human displacement and migration, Engle’s first line further nuances the privilege—the luck—not just of “living” in the United States but of being “born in [that] land.” Far from adopting a nativist position of superiority and distributing American citizenship and its privileges simply on the basis of where one happens to have been born, Engle’s poem asks its reader to consider the experiences of individuals who have arrived at United States shores, and who are arriving even as he writes. As someone who grew up “doing odd jobs for families in the local Jewish community” in Cedar Rapids, and who “lit fires on Sabbath as a ‘Shabas goy,’” (34) it’s possible that Engle responded particularly acutely to the forced displacement of Jews during World War II and the lack of privilege that brought them to—and in some cases got them turned away from—the American security that his idealized American child enjoys by virtue of her native birth. In bracketing the specifics of history and engaging discourses of nationality on the level of myth, “American Child: 3” might leave one thinking about the ethical obligations implied by the luck of privilege laid out in the poem’s first line. The piece’s rhetoric certainly works to sustain the untroubled moral position of the United States war effort, and it’s a poem that, in its inflated language and appeals to popular verse forms, doesn’t contradict an American tradition of patriotic verse and doesn’t subject the nation to critique based on its historical inequities. Yet the motivation for its patriotism is a humbling and different one—one that encourages mass cultural readers to examine their claims to United States privilege and act accordingly, rather than simply capitulate to a militaristic, mass call to war and a feeling of patriotism based on a depersonalized set of righteous appeals to God, mom, and apple pie.

As with every close reading of every poem, it’s difficult to tell if Engle’s readers actually recognized or responded to these aspects of “American Child: 3.” Indeed, we might be even more skeptical in the case of this poem knowing that Engle’s readers were not the educated literati of *Poetry* magazine or the *Kenyon Review*, but what Morris cartooned as the “mindless society” reading *Ladies’ Home Journal*. (More recently, Dana Gioia has echoed Morris by describing this “mindless society” as “the incurious mass audience of the popular media.”) (35) It’s for this reason that I want to turn back to the copy of “American Child: 3” in Fitzgerald’s *Shirley Temple Scrap Book*, for there we find some evidence that Engle’s

rhetoric did, in fact, resonate with at least one seventeen year-old reader. Fitzgerald's scrapbook has many themes, as her editorial rubric included poems about housework and new shoes to poems about soldiers leaving for war and the status of conscientious objectors; "The Death of the G-A-R (a rhyme for Memorial Day)" is immediately followed by "Dune Flowers," and "Air Burial" is shortly preceded by "The Girl I Prize." Throughout the scrapbook, however, Fitzgerald returns to poems about the war and especially to the subject of immigration as it intersects with American ideals and the obligations therein. Take, for example, "The American Way of Life" by Jan Struther, a young woman of Fitzgerald's age (her picture is printed alongside the poem). In the poem, Struther encounters an "old man" spouting "His own particular / Hymn of Hate" in which he decries "Helping the Russians / And helping the Jews" and lobbies, instead, for preserving "Our own, / Known, / Sure, / Secure, / Great American Way of Life." Struther begins her rebuttal by appealing precisely to her own experience as a recent immigrant. "I'm only a guest / From across the sea," she explains, "And I've only been here / Two years or three." It is exactly Struther's status as a non-native United States speaker that enables her to recognize, think about, and promote an American work ethic and tradition of extending helping hands to those in need rather than simply preserving or resting secure in one's own privilege. "And, though they ached / From their own day's labors," Struther says of the country's founders, engaging the debate in terms of her own life experience as well as national ideals, "They were never too tired / To help their neighbors."

Unfortunately, as with many such scrapbooks, Fitzgerald's is an "orphan" text and, as such, it lacks a specific provenance that would allow me to find her and question her regarding her editorial standards. However, the poems that follow Struther's verse suggest the extent to which the morality of United States foreign policy is either contingent upon or justified by the country's immigrant past. In "Stars Through the Perilous Night," for example, Kizer argues that "by our deeds shall liberty / be manifest" and concludes the poem's second section with a partial catalog of liberty's many agents:

By Gutzon Borglum's presidents in Black Hills,
by Carl Sandburg and the People,
yes, always by the people,
shall liberty be known. By John Curry's
murals of John Brown,
by Albert Einstein playing the violin at Princeton,
by our sad-faced refugees, learning
to smile again.

Five pages after Kizer's poem, an unattributed poem, "This is Worth Fighting For," concludes, "We must not fail the world now. / We must not fail to share our freedom with it—afterwards." Engle's "American Child: 3" follows two pages later, its thematic place in the conversation confirmed three pages later by Struthers Burt's "My People Came to This Country" which Fitzgerald excerpted from the same *Ladies' Home Journal* in which Engle was publishing, which recognizes the pattern of wartime displacement, and which notes that "the ghosts of countless countrymen / Are on the march again." It's clear in these contexts

that what resonates with Fitzgerald is Engle's discussion of America and the obligations attending one's being "lucky" enough to have been born there. And whether or not we agree with that line of thought or the discursive register it assumes, it's clear that Engle's grasp of the painted adjective, poetic abstraction, and other conventions of "popular" poetry—all characteristics visible in other poems included in the *Shirley Temple Scrap Book*—is what probably secured "American Child: 3" its audience in the first place.

At the 1959 symposium, Dwight Macdonald told Iowa City audiences that "the serious writer has to ... write for his peers.... In fact, I think an ideal size public is about 5,000." (36) I think that Engle believed differently. A literary democrat, Engle was a great admirer of Walt Whitman—Engle's poetry, in fact, was regularly compared to Whitman's—and for all of his ability to spot emerging literary talent, his publishing record indicates that Engle must have also believed Whitman's claim that "To have great poets, there must be great audiences." Fitzgerald may not be a great audience (however difficult that category would be to define), but her poetry collection more than indicates that she's certainly a good and intelligent one—one, in any case, for whom someone invested in the power of poetry ought to be writing.

* * * * *

The press release for "The Writer in a Mass Culture" identifies Engle as a professor, but it also goes to significant lengths to highlight his publications in, and connections with, the popular press as well—so much so that his work in more literary publications is not only syntactically subordinated but evoked, it seems, only for the purpose of paying it lip service. In addition to running the Workshop, the release explains, "Professor Engle has written widely also for nationally circulated popular magazines, as well as for literary publications. He is the author of articles in the July issues of *Reader's Digest* and the magazine *Holiday*." The document then proceeds to track the exact provenance of this *Reader's Digest* item, establishing its value by its connection to—not separation from—mass cultural venues: "The *Reader's Digest* feature, 'That Old-Time Fourth of July,' is sub-titled 'A lament for the vanished day that wasn't 'safe and sane' but was gloriously exciting.' It gives a nostalgic description of the Fourth of his boyhood. The article appeared originally in the July, 1958, issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*."

Whether or not Engle had a hand in crafting the release—and I suspect he did—it's evident that a certain amount of his credibility hinges not only on his ability to select Workshop faculty members, graduate prize-winning students, and place poems in literary venues, but on his work's broader appeal as well. No doubt this was part of his strategy for publicizing the Workshop, and when Engle himself speaks of his ongoing public relations campaign, it's not without overtones of self-sacrifice. "Publicity and fund-raising are not peculiar gifts given some people and not others," he has said:

Without proper and dignified publicity, with facts to back it up, no program can survive or even keep the reputation it once had. It took years of failure, years of finding the right approaches, to persuade newspapers and magazines to recognize the uniqueness and productivity of the Writers' Workshop. The same with money—it

took years of failing, of refusing to accept NO as a suitable answer, before I learned about fund-raising. Self-taught, since no one in this University could give me practical advice (I speak of the humanities, since the sciences are a special case), I learned the hard and obstinate way, and not for self-aggrandizement, but for the Workshop. (37)

Indeed, in an age when Norman Mailer has appeared on WB's *Gilmore Girls* (in an episode titled "Norman Mailer, I'm Pregnant"), Engle's statement is hardly something with which we can find fault; in fact, considering the current economic situation of the arts and humanities, we might do well to listen to Engle and follow his lead a bit more closely.

And yet, Engle's willingness to market himself and his work for the sake of the Workshop doesn't quite explain why he would be interested in writing for Hallmark. In Box 12 of the Engle papers, there is a slim file folder titled "Poems for Hallmark" which contains the bits of greeting card verse that he apparently had been honing between 1952 and 1957. (Engle wouldn't forget this writing either. Ed Folsom, now the University of Iowa's Roy J. Carver Professor of English, remembers Engle reciting poetry to Folsom's three year-old son at a party in the 1970s. When asked its source, Engle—in the presence of poet and translator W.S. Merwin who was in town and staying at the Folsom residence—said it was from the Hallmark verse that he used to write.) Some of the archived poems are marked as successful tries; others are not. Many have handwritten comments on them, and their titles are not unpredictable: "Friendship," "A Little Boy Means," "For A Birthday," etc. There is a copy of the verse by Edgar Guest that I quoted earlier in this essay—the one which Hallmark printed inside its first "Friendship" card in 1916 and which presumably served as the model for Engle's own writing. Indeed, the folder opens with a finished Hallmark product itself: a green Christmas card with the three wise men embossed in gold on front. Inside, the right-hand panel reads "May your Christmas be filled with true joy," and the left—which we're used to seeing left blank—contains "The Wise Men" with Engle's name in the byline:

Seeing that star,
The Wise Men, swift
To bow to the Boy,
Gave Him their gift.

Their gift was gold,
And the bent knee,
Hard metal and
Humility.

Now He, the Son
of Joseph's wife,
Gives them His gift:
Immortal life.

This is the hope

Of a world gone wild:
 When proud men kneel
 To a little Child.

As with “American Child: 3” there is much to dislike about this verse from the vantage point of “serious” writing: the hackneyed, beginner-level rhymes; the convoluted ways of making those rhymes; the reliance on sentimental religiosity and abstraction; etc. Here, we can also see some of the same poetic strategies that Engle used in “American Child: 3,” most strikingly the heavy use of alliteration to structure his two-beat lines. And just as “American Child: 3” contained within it a thesis (“Lucky the living child born in a land”), so too does “The Wise Men” make its purpose clear (“This is the hope / Of a world gone wild”).

But, interestingly, “The Wise Men” isn’t really good greeting card verse either. Rather than a vague expression of sentiment couched largely in lyrical abstractions—see, for example, Guest’s verse about friendship—Engle’s poem is narrative, it trades in specific details and speaks about a specific historical moment (the Magi’s gifts rather than “giving” in general), and it makes a gesture, at least, to place the card and its occasion in a larger and even social context (“a world gone wild”), linking the greeting to circumstances external to Hallmark in ways that such cards rarely venture to do; rather than affirming the status quo and encouraging complacency on the part of the card’s purchaser or recipient, Engle’s verse injects a certain anxiety about the world and the place of giving in it. Furthermore, and along these same lines, “The Wise Men” seeks to instruct its readers—an entirely different function than usual greeting card verse, but one that isn’t unpredictable coming as it does from Engle the one-time preacher at Stumptown church. The very didacticism repellant to Workshop standards of literary quality doesn’t sit easily here either; instead of simply expressing season’s greetings—that work is done on the facing panel by the phrase “May your Christmas be filled with true joy”—it uses the time of year to attempt an argument about the importance of humility and the nature of gift giving to restoring peace and order in “a world gone wild.”

Even though “The Wise Men” displays many of the hallmarks—pun intended, right?—of “bad” writing, it is not without its complexities at the same time. Some readers might rightly wish to talk about Engle’s conspicuous removal of Mary from the narrative, as the phrase “the Son / of Joseph’s wife” emphasizes the homosocial nature of this particular religious event. Other readers might point to how the poem’s short lines and abrupt enjambments (I’m thinking of the lines that break on “swift” and “and,” for example) slow the reader’s passage through—and thus beg an attention to the material aspects of—the poem in ways that the sing-songy lyrics more typical of greeting cards do not. I, however, am left thinking most about Engle’s poem in the context of seasonal gift-giving, for not only does his poem about the gifts of gold, humility, and eternal life occur in the context of Christmas’s gift exchange, but on a gift itself—the Hallmark card. Indeed, this intersection of Biblical giving and present-day card giving is itself suggested by the word “Now” which begins stanza three. Not only does that “now” at the poem’s halfway point transition the narrative from past tense to present tense—from the Magi who “gave Him their gift” to the Son who “[g]ives them His gift”—but it serves also as a storytelling device signaling a shift in narrative intensity, cueing us to compare the Magi’s gifts of gold and humility with Christ’s

gift of “immortal life.” In moving the poem into a present tense, though, the word “now” also turns historical time into religious time in which, as the T.S. Eliot of “Four Quartets” wrote, “all time is eternally present.” That “now” must include the present day as well—the moment the card is being bought, the moment it is posted in the mail, the moment it is opened and read—and establishes a direct link between the giving in the nativity scene “back then” and the Hallmark card that is given or received in the “now.”

And therein, I think, lies the failure of “The Wise Men”—not in its sappy rhymes, religious subject matter, or commercial context, but in suggesting that the act of buying and giving a commercial greeting card is somehow parallel to the giving in the Biblical scene. Not only does the analogy cheapen the Christian story—which, for a believer, is a potentially revolutionary act of submission to ideals that are greater than those represented by “gold” and to a figure (Christ) who would overturn the tables at the marketplace of which Hallmark is part—but it implies that all it takes to be a good giving Christian is to be a good capitalist subject buying and giving ready-made greeting cards. One can’t help but be confused by the logic of Engle’s parallel: what, exactly, is the exchange that Engle wants to celebrate in the story of the Magi—the gold, or the humility, or both? Is Christ’s “immortal life” given freely, or is it part of a commercial contract between the Wise Men and Christ that is not so separate from the one between Hallmark and card buyer? Is the card buyer being compared to the Magi and, if so, into what messianic role does that cast Hallmark or the card’s recipient, and what is each expected to offer in return? Far from endorsing an economy in which humility and giving are selfless acts separate from and potentially resisting the values of the commercial marketplace, Engle’s poem uncomfortably appears to conflate the two, describing selflessness as an economic transaction and promoting that transaction as a cure for “a world gone wild.” And while that’s a transaction that certainly pays off financially and ideologically for Hallmark or the institution of the church, it’s hard to tell how it pays off for anyone else. If Engle was able to negotiate some of the authorial compromises required by mass culture in “American Child: 3,” he’s less able to do so here, not because “[a]rt and mass distribution are simply incompatible” as Harris claimed in the 1959 symposium, but because those compromises are so difficult—or so easy—to make.

* * * * *

Early in *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory 1910-1945*—a book which appeared in 1989 to challenge and ultimately reconfigure the way we approach the poetry of the modern period—Cary Nelson writes:

[W]e no longer know the history of the poetry of the first half of this century; most of us, moreover, do not know that the knowledge is gone. Indeed, we tend to be unaware of how or why such a process of literary forgetfulness occurs, let alone why it occurs among the very people who consider themselves the custodians of our literary heritage. Custodians, of course, concern themselves not only with conserving the past but also with selectively disposing of much of it ... (38)

Something along the same lines might be said, I think, not only of the Writers' Workshop but of the field of creative writing in general. Precious little in the way of a cultural history of either has been written to this date, and when we lose—or forget—that history, we ultimately disable ourselves and our sense of what the M.F.A. can and should do for ourselves and our students. At a time when the humanities in general are at risk and under siege, the general tendency is to circle the wagons and stridently define the integrity of our departments—"Our own, / Known, / Sure, / Secure" way of life—out of an impulse for self-preservation. Like Jan Struthers, however, we might also choose to look outward and employ the resources of our past as much as possible—to look not only for ways in which our writing can meet, engage, and challenge mass culture (something which press runs of 1,000 typically do not do), but also for ways in which it might bridge divides within the discipline of English and across the university as well.

Toward the final stages of writing this piece, I wanted to find out where Paul Engle is buried; I thought, perhaps, there would be a few verses carved into his headstone which would make for a fitting conclusion, or that the view from his grave would include any number of the programs or departments with which he was affiliated, which he shepherded to prominence, or which he founded. I thought the Writers' Workshop would certainly know where to send me, so I called them first. They told me they had no idea and, expressing little desire to discover the answer, advised me to call the I.W.P., which would "know for sure." However, the I.W.P. didn't have an answer for me either, though they at least offered to find out and promised to call me back. They never did. As with the history of modern American poetry, we appear to no longer know or care to know much about the history of the Workshops in Iowa City—nor, for that matter, whether its longtime director wrote highbrow poetry, Hallmark poetry, or both, and why any of that might make much of a difference in the present time.

I did finally find out where Engle is buried, however. I called Oakland Cemetery in Iowa City—our most famous graveyard located not five miles from campus and home to the "black angel" statue around which generations of students, including Robert Bly, have gathered to be close to death and "talk about art." (39) One of the grounds keepers informed me that Engle was buried in Lot 157. He cheerfully led me there in his large white pickup truck and showed me the black, circular stone with a flat face and two lines of Engle's poetry etched in the side facing east. "I can't move mountains," it reads, "But I can make light." Hualing sees to it that the grave is tended regularly, and the stone's marble is so smooth that one can see one's reflection in it almost perfectly, a fact my guide pointed out by saying, "It's so shiny we used to use it for a mirror to comb our hair in before funerals." He didn't know who Engle was, nor did he seem particularly impressed when I told him, but he did tell me that before Engle died, there weren't any black stones in that part of the cemetery. Now, they're everywhere you look.

Mike Chasar has a Ph.D. in English and a certificate in Book Studies from the University of Iowa. He also holds an M.A. in creative writing from Miami University in Ohio. He has published scholarly work in American Literature, poetry in *Poetry* magazine, and was a regular contributor of verse commentary to “Poetic License,” an Op-Ed page feature of the Iowa City daily newspaper, *The Press-Citizen*. In 2008, his dissertation *Everyday Reading: U.S. Poetry and Popular Culture 1880-1945* received first prize in the national *Distinguished Dissertation* competition sponsored by the Council of Graduate Schools and UMI Dissertation Publishing. He is the co-editor, with Heidi R. Bean, of *Poetry after Cultural Studies*, ed. and (Iowa City: U of Iowa P), forthcoming in 2011. He teaches English at Willamette University in Salem, OR..

NOTES

1. This press release, the full transcript of “The Writer in a Mass Culture,” and other documents relating to the 1959 *Esquire*/Iowa event are in Box 11 of the Papers of Paul Engle located in the University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections Department. All quotations I cite from “The Writer in a Mass Culture” refer to this transcript. Hereafter, notations referring to Engle’s papers will be abbreviated to Papers of Paul Engle, followed by the relevant Box number.

2. “The Writer in a Mass Culture,” 3.
3. “The Writer in a Mass Culture,” 6.
4. “The Writer in a Mass Culture,” 3.
5. “The Writer in a Mass Culture,” 7-8.
6. “The Writer in a Mass Culture,” 14-15.
7. “The Writer in a Mass Culture,” 16.
8. Paul Engle, *Resume* [c. 1962], Papers of Paul Engle, Box 4.
9. Vince Clemente, “Paul Engle’s Long Reach: From Iowa City to Long island,” *The South Carolina Review* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 188.
10. Engle, *resume*.
11. Engle, *resume*.
12. Paul Engle, “Easter,” *Better Homes & Gardens* 38 (April 1960): 35.
13. Engle, *resume*.
14. Joseph Wilson, “Paul Engle,” *American Poets, 1880-1945: Second Series*, ed. Peter Quartermain (Detroit: Gale, 1985), 161 & 164.
15. Stephen Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers’ Workshop: Origins, Emergence & Growth* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1980).

16. See University of Iowa News Releases, "UI, Iowa City unveil formal UNESCO City of Literature proposal," http://news-releases.uiowa.edu/2007/december/121907unesco_proposal.html, Accessed 30 July 2008.
17. Wilson, 165.
18. Wilbers, 87.
19. Wilson, 160.
20. Clemente, 186.
21. Richard B. Weber, "Paul Engle: A Checklist," *Books at Iowa* 5 (1966): 11-37.
22. Poetry Scrapbooks: An online archive, "Joyce Fitzgerald's Scrapbook," ed. Mike Chasar, <http://www.obermanncenter.com/scholars/mikechasar/>, Accessed 30 July 2008. This archive includes nine other examples of poetry scrapbooks assembled by American readers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
23. Paul Engle, "The Need for Poetry," Papers of Paul Engle, Box 14, Folder 2.
24. Paul Engle, "Why Read Poetry?," Papers of Paul Engle, Box 15, Folder 6.
25. Joan Shelley Rubin, "'They Flash Upon That Inward Eye': Poetry Recitation and American Readers," *Reading Acts: U.S. Readers' Interactions with Literature, 1800-1950*, ed. Barbara Ryan and Amy M. Thomas (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2002), 260, 265 & 266.
26. Mark W. Van Wienen, *Partisans and Poets: The Political Work of American Poetry in the Great War* (NY: Cambridge UP, 1997), 2.
27. Paul Engle, "American Child: 3," *Ladies' Home Journal* 62 (January 1945): 89.
28. Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect" [1913, 1918], *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1954), 12.
29. Ezra Pound, "A Few Don'ts for an Imagiste," *Poetry* 1, no. 6 (March 1913): 201.
30. Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 2.
31. Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 14.
32. Wilson, 161.
33. Qtd. Wilson, 162.
34. Wilson, 161.
35. Dana Gioia, "Preface," in *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2002), xviii.
36. "The Writer in a Mass Culture," 8.
37. Wilbers, 101.
38. Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory 1910-1945* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989), 4.
39. Robert Bly, "Remembering Paul Engle in Iowa City: When Literary Life Was Still Piled Up In A Few Places," robertbly.com, 2001, Accessed 15 May 2007.

Two essays about Paul Engle [PDFs]. "Remembering Paul Engle" [PDF] by Mike Chasar. Reprinted courtesy The Writer's Chronicle. "Middle Man: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writer's Workshop" [PDF] by Loren Glass in The Minnesota Review, 2009. Playwright Lisa Schlesinger has dramatized Paul and Hualing Engles' life and work in 12 scenes. Upcoming Events. Feb 25, 5:30 pm Eyes Closed Eyes Open: a Collaboration between the International Writing Program and the Department of Dance. Archives. IWP Media Gallery. Paul Hamilton Engle (October 12, 1908 - March 22, 1991) was an American poet, editor, teacher, and literary critic, perhaps best remembered as a long-time director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and as founder of the International Writing Program, both at the University of Iowa. Engle was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to Evelyn (Reinheiner) and Thomas Allen Engle, a livery stable owner. He grew up in the Wellington Heights section of Cedar Rapids. He graduated from Washington High School in Cedar Rapids Paul Hamilton Engle was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on Oct. 12, 1908. He attended Coe College in his hometown and pursued advanced studies at the University of Iowa, Columbia University, and Oxford University, which he attended as a Rhodes scholar. During his tenure the workshop rose to prominence, bringing to Iowa a sterling roster of teachers and students that included Robert Penn Warren, Flannery O'Connor, John Cheever, Wallace Stegner, W.D. Snodgrass, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Paul Engle (October 12, 1908 - March 22, 1991), was an American poet, editor, teacher, literary critic, novelist, and playwright. He is remembered as the long-time director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and as co-founder of the International Writing Program (IWP), both at the University of Iowa. Born Paul Hamilton Engle in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to Thomas Allen, a livery stable owner, and Evelyn (Reinheiner) Engle, Engle grew up in the Wellington Heights section of Cedar Rapids. He graduated from See more of Paul Engle Association for Community Arts on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of Paul Engle Association for Community Arts on Facebook. Log In. Forgotten account? To continue Paul Engle's tradition, the City of Literature organization annually solicits essays from Iowa high school sophomores about an Iowa experience. To continue Paul Engle's tradition, the City of Literature organization annually solicits essays from Iowa high school sophomores about an Iowa experience.