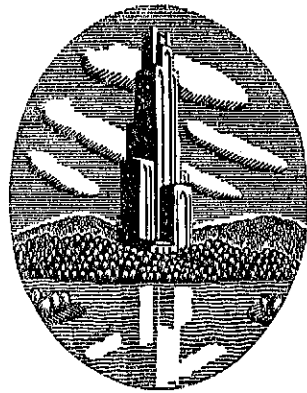


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# HIDDEN STREAMS

*Essays on  
writing*

These answers are different, yet at bottom they all amount to about one thing. They are simple, because they plot the flow of a certainty, and they rest on the realities of love, and beauty, and law, and worship, and humility, and the things not merely by-the-way. Just the simplicity of the answer is the shattering quality in it. Its implications are without end; to follow what it implies seems too simple to be possible.

For it is hard to carry beauty and love out into the working-day world, to be just and compassionate, to worship truth and to question with wisdom, to adjust simplicity to living, to temper heavenly light to earthly eyes, to keep the road. Indeed it is difficult to fuse the two. Poetry never tells how to join them. It gives the living word; it shows the light. The adjustment is left to each who reads.

Great poetry is universal. It might seem that this hidden world out of which the poet writes, so intense and personal, would be too intimate for anybody else to share. It is not. Because poetry gets at the reality of one man's life, it can be understood by others. Common qualities are in the hidden patterns. This inner life of different men, this spiritual depth, is like physical life in man and plants and animals, a mystery which unites them and makes a living bird more like a living man than a man, dead, is like the man who is alive. Great poetry cannot be eccentric or isolated or have arrogant self-assertion. If a poem does not cut down to common possessions, then it has not much vitality. Poetry understands others and has compassion with them. The truth is, great poetry has usually dealt with fairly few matters—death, life, work, play, love, God, liberty, nature, one's relation to others, dreams—matters common to man and uniting them beneath their differences.

Most of our time, it is right to be busy at the details and do the usual, not conscious of streams which run below. But there are times when deep realities rise, clear, in consciousness. Details, then, have small importance. Great poetry tells this reality and insight. When happiness tests, when "war, death, or sickness," as Shakespeare says, "do lay seige," when our immediate society confuses us, poetry encourages toward what are worth honor and service. By giving expression it gives strength. So, to-day, we need, more than we can ever say, the reality in great poetry.

## About These Essays

EDWIN L. PETERSON

THIS evening and for several evenings I have been reading the essays that make up this book. For me, they have been comforting, for they reaffirm beliefs that some of us have clung to, in a stubborn way, over many years. These beliefs have not always been popular. They are not popular today. And yet for some who read or write or teach, they matter. Here in these essays, five distinguished persons, readers, writers, and teachers, turn round on the fingers of their minds problems about life and literature. With an uncommon unanimity—though perhaps it is the common way of wisdom—all of them give their own answers to the problems, and in their agreement is hope.

In other times than ours it might not be surprising to find five essayists agreeing on the essential nature of writing and reading. But today it is surprising, for in our times values seem to shift almost hourly. The difference in the critical values of Sydney and Shelley, of Shelley and Arnold, of Arnold and Saintsbury, is great only in years and hardly at all in essentials; the difference, though, between Saintsbury and most members of the new school of criticism—to use a convenient example—is great in more than years, so much more that we wonder whether Saintsbury and the men with the new little microscopes are looking for the same things.

Today, in one literature class, the teacher may place his emphasis not so much on literature as on historical and biographical backgrounds; in another, on defending Aristotelian standards; in another, on philology; in another, on a minute and almost psychiatric analysis of the implications of a phrase. In each of these classes there is much to be learned, no doubt, and much that is good. Nevertheless, we could be excused for wondering whether in any of these classes there is time left for talking about what the poem or story or essay says, the way it says it, and whether what it says is worth saying.

In the composition classroom, too, is this same tangential and

varied purpose. (Could this be because there is not a university that really trains its composition teachers?) One composition class studies logic instead of writing, another studies the dictionary, another studies grammar, and another studies the new semantics from a young instructor who has just seen the vision. Again we could be excused for wondering if there is any time left for the student to examine his own real and important world, be it art, engineering, science, or business; to come to some conclusions about it; to test the validity of the conclusions; and then to write about them clearly and convincingly—with due and even reverent regard for the conventions of language.

The essays in this book are not tangents. They radiate values from a common center, and that center is the meaning of life to those who live it, narrowly or broadly. Professor Hastings, for instance, speaks of "personal truth," Professor Lee of "spiritual strength," Professor Beck of "the inciting vision" and of "an inspired assertion." How strangely the words fall upon the ears of the modern critic and teacher! Miss Storm Jameson, quoting Valery, hears "the deep note of existence" and sees a writer who "has not pushed far enough into the darkness." Professor Hunt finds "a hill of illumination" and tells us that poetry "gets at the core of what it talks about."

It is this core, this center, this inspired assertion, that is sometimes forgotten in the study of literature and of writing—perhaps because to the teacher it is obvious, perhaps because it is a hill of illumination too blinding to be talked about, perhaps—let us be truthful—because it is not seen. Whatever the cause, the result of such forgetting is sterile teaching and sterile studying, and I am thankful this evening that our five essayists have reminded us of the deadly peril of such forgetting.

## II

Much of my interest in this book comes from my having been for many years a teacher of composition.

Now the teaching of composition seems to the uninitiate to have a divided purpose, and in that seeming division lies confusion.

One aim, of course, is to teach the tools of language—syntax, punctuation, and, in these days, even spelling. It is true that students know less about formal grammar today, having studied it less, than they did when our essayists were younger. The grammar school teaches less grammar than it did. It is probably true also that students know less

spelling and punctuation than the student of thirty years ago—though as I recall some of my own papers written in those years I am not so sure.

I do know that it is hard to teach these mechanics of language. I know also that it is the obligation of the teacher to get his students to learn these mechanics, which are the conventions of language. To do so requires skill of a high order, and patience and kindness. The good teacher frequently reminds himself that his students today live not in a world of books, such as the teacher lived in when he was a boy, but in a world of radio, television, and motion pictures, in which the printed word is less important than the spoken and in which taste, thoughtfulness, and good manners are not important at all. Acknowledging this background, the composition teacher attempts to break down in one year the bad language habits of a lifetime and to replace them with good; and usually he has little to guide him save the light of his own genius as a teacher of composition. The task seems at times impossible, and yet it must be done.

To reach the second aim of the composition teacher is even more difficult. It is to show the student that what he has to say should have meaning, even good meaning. At this point, the composition teacher, if he is wise, will enter with his students the world that our essayists talk about—the world they describe in such phrases as "personal truth," "inspired assertion," "spiritual strength," "deep note of existence," and "hill of illumination." Within the circle of his own and sometimes more limited experience, the student will then examine his life and will find there some meaning, some significance. Surely to encourage search for significance—be it in engineering, medicine, commerce, science, or art—is one of the duties of a university. Especially is this true in our own time, when every evening makes us wonder about the coming dawn.

These two purposes of a composition course are not, as is commonly believed, incompatible. On the contrary, neither one is likely to be realized without the other. Repeatedly it has been shown that the grammar and syntax which the student learned in college, does not always carry over into his everyday expression—not though the workbook shows that the student can fill in perfectly all the blanks. The motivation of the teaching has been wrong. The student is working for a score on a note book, not for the ability to say as well as he can possibly say it something that he wants to say.

But suppose the composition teacher works from the other direction. Suppose he first gets the student to look at his world with sharp, clear eyes, to descend into it more deeply than ever he has before, and then, after solitude and meditation, to come to some conclusions about it. Suppose the student "pushes far enough into the darkness," on and on until after a time there is a faint light ahead of him, and then, suddenly, he finds himself standing on that "hill of illumination" Professor Hunt speaks of. After such an experience—and it is an experience that happens to all of us, though we seldom mention it—there is much to tell and a deep compulsion to tell it. The student wants to talk about this wonderful something he has seen and felt.

Now he *wants* to write, and the words will come if the teacher lets them. After a time, teacher and student look at the paper. There are many mistakes—dangling participles, commas where there should be none, words that are inaccurate, an order that is illogical. But now there is a reason for the correction of these mistakes—each correction brings more and more clear, more and more articulate, even more and more noble, that "inspired assertion" the student wants to make. At last there is a meaning to the mechanics, the conventions of language. They are worth learning, for they are needed to make things clear, especially important things.

I have not meant to oversimplify the problem of teaching a student to write. It is one of the most difficult jobs in the whole university, and it requires carefully selected and carefully trained teachers, specialists in their own right. Such teachers will not be content with teaching syntax. Other matters, they know, must be taught: hundreds of them. Student and teacher will go on, perhaps, to the exciting study of how to explain (exposition, it is usually called) and to seeing the evil that comes to literature and life when the balance between the general and the specific is bad, and the beauty and wisdom that may come when the balance is good. After a time, if teachers and students are working at their best, there will be a perceptible excellence in the writing of engineering reports, of laboratory experiments, of essay examinations in every subject from art to zoology, and there will be an improvement in the whole process of logical thinking and honest feeling among the students of the university. But this will happen only if both students and teachers of composition are living in the world of "spiritual strength" mentioned by one of our essayists, living close to "the core of what it talks about."

If student and teacher have been working together at their best, other things can happen. A student may develop, for example, an interest in storytelling. Years later, whether he has become a merchant or a lawyer, he may storytell whatever he has seen, may chronicle whatever good he has picked up along the way, and life will be a little better for his telling. The apprentice to a lawyer may become, like Dickens, a great novelist, and the clerk may become, like Chaucer, a great poet and an interpreter of human conduct. He may help others find values and achieve the stable comprehension and human kindness that we need if we are to be happy, are to dwell in peace.

These things could happen. In all likelihood not many of them would. That is just common sense. The making of one Leonardo or of one Chaucer, though, is a chance worth taking, a chance that any university in the world should dare to take if we want education in the noble sense—and civilization—to survive. And, what is more important, especially to us in our day, we would have physicians, lawyers, engineers, businessmen, accountants, and scientists who are better because they write and talk more articulately, because they are closer to the things that matter, because they have made the lonely journey through darkness into light.

This evening, while I have been reading these essays and writing about them, from time to time I have looked out my window. Jackson's hill is dark against a bright sky, and there is fog down in the valley. The combination of details seems strangely permanent and good. And yet I know that outside the window there is something else, an ominous dust that rose from Storm Jameson's shattered London, that rose again from Hiroshima and drifted across the world and into this gentle valley. There is also a dim moon. Even in moonlight we can see a little—if we choose to see. We can still, of course, be merely teachers of grammar, spelling, and footnoted information about great books. And the dust will dull our sight. Or we can do better. Over and above the details, we can teach meaning and significance through the great books that great men have written and through the sentences, though they are clumsy and fumbling, of college students who are, even now, searching after truth. Hearing the "deep note of existence" and pushing "far enough into the darkness," we can, before it is too late, reach a "hill of illumination" in college teaching and in other things. It is this hope, this probability, that makes me like these essays and the beliefs they reaffirm.