

## BOOK REVIEW

BY NAOZO UENO

*MIDLAND: Twenty-five Years of Fiction and Poetry Selected from the Writing Workshop of the State University of Iowa.* Edited by Paul Engle. New York: Random House, 1961.

Never before in the history of the literature of the west has there been such close relationship between writers and the academic world. The tendency is the more marked in America, where a college professor of English literature may easily write a best-seller novel, while a writer, who has heretofore enjoyed a free-lancing life and somewhat irregular income, is invited to teach creative writing or give lectures on literature at a university. A famous instance is that of Robert Penn Warren, professor of Kenyon College, who writes one of the most intellectual novels of our time and poems of a high order. Another instance is that of Richard P. Blackmur, who was a free-lancing poet and critic and a contributor to "little magazines" before he joined the faculty at Princeton in 1940. T. S. Eliot gives a series of lectures at universities during his visit to America. It is a standing joke nowadays that if Keats were living today he would not die in poverty, for he would be a professor.

One result of this interchange between the literary world and the campus is that the university classrooms are now becoming the birthplaces of creative writers. Students in literature courses are not satisfied with only passive and academic study of the literary products, but are eager to try their hands at creative writing under the guidance of a writer-professor. Young professors, in their turn, conduct heated classroom discussions on literary criticism with the students.

And yet there are not many universities in America which offer their students the chances of exercising their skill at creative writing. The State University of Iowa is one of the few. Its Writing Workshop has a twenty-five year history, which resulted in the publication of *Midland*, an anthology of short stories and poems by the young writers who once studied there. According to the delightful

introduction by Professor Paul Engle, who is the director of this Workshop, it has been a meeting place for young artistic minds from all over the world.

This does not mean that the stories and the poems in *Midland* were actually written in the classroom, but it does that the authors who contributed them were first nurtured in the creative atmosphere of the Workshop under Mr. Engle. It seems that the university gives generous encouragement to this kind of project. In the Workshop there is vigorous discussion as each student submits his own work for classroom criticism. The students are not only American, but Hungarian, Swedish, Italian, British, Japanese, Indian, Korean, etc., etc. Mr. Engle writes in his dedication "To the State University of Iowa":

The writer has come to you from the far corners of this wide country and from the farthest curves of the round world. . . . The limit of your campus is not street or building, but whatever outermost space the creative mind can reach in its remotest flight.

Many promising young writers went into the world from this class room. Some of them are more than promising, for they are well established now. The anthology includes the works of such writers as R. V. Cassill, James B. Hall, Robie Macauley, Warren Miller, Flannery O'Conner, Bienvenido Santos, Jean Stafford, Wallace Stegner, Richard G. Stern, and such poets as Jean Cooper, Henri Coulette, Bruce Cutler, William Dickey, Harry Duncan, Donald Finkel, Kimon Friar, Jean Garrigue, Walker Gibson, Anthony Hecht, Theodore Holmes, Donald Justice, Robert Mezey, W. D. Snodgrass, Paul Engle himself, and Tennessee Williams. The last named, of course, is more famous as a playwright than as a poet.

The anthology includes poems by two Japanese students—"Hiroshima" by Miss Yoshie Osada, and "On the Bridge" by Satoru Sato. A Korean writer contributes his story. Since I am not a connoisseur of Korean literature, I do not know whether the writer Kim Yong Ik is active in the Korean literary world, or whether he is now writing in English, excepting the fact that the story "The Wedding Shoes" first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1952.

Some of the stories and poems in this book made their first appearance in *The New Yorker*; Jane Cooper's "Morning on the St.

John's" (1957), David Clay Jenkins' "Summer: Sun and Shade" (1952), Calvin Kentfield's "The Bell of Charity" (1955), Philip Levine's "Mad Day in March" (1958), Robert Mezey's "Against Seasons" (1959), Wallen Miller's "Man Waiting" (1959), Paul Petrie's "Bridge Park" (1957), and Jean Stafford's "In the Zoo" (1953). A great many first appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Hudson Review*, or *The Swanee Review*, which are non-commercial literary journals of universities of very high standard. Many poems in this book had found their way into *Poetry*.

Since I am not well equipped to discuss poems, I want to confine my criticism to that of the short stories, knowing fully that this does not give fair treatment to the anthology, for even to such an uninitiated person as myself the poems look good. Mr. Engle contributes his own poems. On the whole, the poems show less tendency to be obscure than the poems by some of the young post-war poets.

The stories are on the whole very well constructed and succeed in making a world of their own. In "That Lovely Green Boat" William Berge tells with fresh sensitivity the joy and sorrow of a teen-age boy. Bienvenido N. Santos reveals in "The Transfer" the mature old-world attitude toward the aged and the sudden recurrence of the son-father relationship in the mind of a young priest. Warren Miller reaches sophistication and depth in depicting the mind of a man estranged from his wife and alone in Mexico City in his "Man Waiting." Hollis Summers' "The Prayer Meeting" is unique of its type, with its satire of the mediocre seen through the eyes of a mean old woman. Wallace Stegner shows in his "The Blue-Winged Teal" a young man's frustration and his coming to a kind of peace with the people around him. Those are some of the outstanding short stories. Sometimes a story is a mere attempt at the harsh and the shocking, as in "The Passion for Silver's Arm" by Herbert Wilner. Sometimes a story is well constructed but devoid of intrinsic value.

A survey of the stories shows one fact which to me is interesting. If this were a collection of young Japanese writers who belong somewhere between the highbrow and the popular—if I may venture a supposition—then the statistics would show that about twenty stories would have their settings in feudal Japan. In other words, so many of them would be "period," although the theme, or the

message they give would be modern. For instance, one story would give a modern interpretation of *samurai* morals while another might tell of the life of a farmer under his feudal lord.

There is a tradition of historical novels in America and Britain, but there are so few short stories with the "period" setting. One reason is, perhaps, because in Japan where the culture is homogeneous, mere words like *Tokugawa family* or *The Lord of the Province of Awa* are enough to evoke in our minds a body of knowledge and emotions concerning the modes of life in feudal Japan. These words are the clues, whereas in the west culture is so heterogeneous that the writer first has to define what country and when, and this takes more space than a short story can afford to give. Even if the setting is such a well-known place and period as London under Elizabeth I, the writer has to spend some pages before he can take his reader under his magic spell of make-belief. This may account for the lack of "period" settings in short stories in the west. Another reason may be that in Japan the past has so much importance compared to America.

Another difference is that so many stories in this collection are told as childhood memories of the hero or the heroine, who talks in the first-person singular. "That Lovely Green Boat" is the memory of "I" when "I" was fourteen years old. "The Proud Suitor" by James Buechler begins: "About thirty years ago, when my father and mother were about to marry," in an Italian community in downtown New York. "The Prize" by R. V. Cassil is a boyhood memory of "me." Again "The Bell of Charity" by Calvin Kentfield is told by a young boy "I." The story of "The Wedding Shoes" is told as the experience of the writer himself when he was a young boy. "The Rebels" by Richard Power tells what happened in a small village school between the teacher and the pupils as seen through the eye of one of the boys who calls himself "I." "In the Zoo" is a childhood experience told by "me," and "I" am still suffering from it.

To me, this abundance of stories told in the first person singular in retrospect is an interesting statistical fact. Why are so many human experiences presented in this form? This is not a phenomenon characteristic of this book. *The New Yorker* has quite often a

story told as "my childhood memory." Just to cite a few examples from my faulty memory, there was "Early Tea at the Castle" by Edith Templeton in last year's Sept. 30th issue, and also there was a childhood memory of a Jewish refugee, and also Peter Taylor told his story as something that happened in his childhood.

This form of presentation has many advantages: telling an event as something that happened in the author's life gives credulity to the story. Also the event is seen through the eyes of a child to whom only a limited aspect of the occurrences of the adult world makes sense, and yet he is endowed with peculiar puerile perception which an adult cannot have. Thus the presentation becomes conveniently limited in scope and yet is permeated with the intuitive insight of children.

Another reason this form of storytelling is so predominant in the collection is perhaps because when a person begins his apprenticeship as a writer, one of the first things he tries to do is to tell a story as an autobiographical episode. Very often he uses his own childhood experience as a basis. Also, the nostalgic appeal of such a story to the reader has to be taken into account.

I do not know of any attempt in the Japanese universities which corresponds to the Workshop in the State University of Iowa. Waseda University is famous for having produced many Japanese writers, and yet those writers as young men trained themselves by personally becoming pupils to the already established writers outside school.

This anthology is valuable for the good works contained, and also as an epitome of what an academic institution can do to help the realization of literary potentiality in people.