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Paul Engle

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Engle, Paul

(12 October 1908–22 March 1991), poet, literary critic, and educator, was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the son of Thomas Allen, a horse trader, and Evelyn (Reinheimer) Engle. He was educated at local schools, helped his father in the livery stable, and worked as a newsboy selling papers on the streets, a carrier boy, a chauffeur, a gardener, and, for many years, a drugstore clerk. He began writing poetry at Washington High School and was elected class poet. At Coe College, in Cedar Rapids, he studied English literature, American history, and languages, and he was awarded a B.A. in 1931. As an undergraduate student he started preaching at Stumptown church on the edge of town, intending to become a Methodist minister. But he decided instead to enter the University of Iowa and obtained an M.A. in 1932. His thesis consisted of an original book of poems, *Worn Earth*, which won the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize that year and was published by Yale University Press. This was one of the first books of poems to be submitted for a graduate degree in the United States.

After a year at Columbia University in New York City, studying English and anthropology toward a Ph.D., Engle was awarded a Rhodes scholarship (1933–1936) at Merton College, University of Oxford. He studied under the poet Edmund Blunden, who became a close friend. He also distinguished himself as an athlete: he played on the college cricket team, rowed in the College First Eight, and went on to row in the International Regattas at Marlow and Henley on the river Thames. He traveled extensively around England and on the Continent, including in Germany, where he perfected his knowledge of the German language and witnessed life under the Nazi regime. In 1936 he was awarded a second M.A. degree, and he married Mary Nomine Nissen, a former neighbor in Cedar Rapids. After their honeymoon in the Soviet Union, Engle described the consequences of the Bolshevik revolution in a long poem, "Russia." Having spent

several years away from Iowa, Engle was eager to return there and in 1937 he accepted a post at the University of Iowa—where he would spend his entire academic career.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s Engle had an established reputation as a poet of the American landscape and way of life. After *Worn Earth* he published three collections of poems with Doubleday: *American Song* (1934), *Break the Heart's Anger* (1936), and *Corn* (1939). Random House then issued his first novel *Always the Land* (1941) and a book of poems, *West of Midnight* (1941). With a light teaching load, Engle spent most of his time writing—an arrangement encouraged by the University of Iowa, which employed the painter [Grant Wood](#) under a similar scheme. The idea was that a university should welcome creative work, not just scholarship, and that students who wished to be helped with painting or writing or music could consult a practicing artist for advice.

In 1941 Engle became director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, replacing Wilbur Schramm who had founded the program five years earlier. Engle presided over the program's coming of age with a fierce determination to raise funds, attract the best writers, and put Iowa City on the literary map. The university could be the answer to the problem of having no cultural centers between New York and Hollywood, as Engle often wrote in his letters to publishers, businessmen, foundations, and charities.

In addition to his work as administrator, fundraiser, and instructor, Engle continued to write, finding inspiration in family life. *American Child*, a sequence of sonnets for his two daughters, was published by Random House in 1945. However, his wife suffered from severe depression and despite medical treatment (including a stay in a psychiatric hospital in 1950), her condition worsened and she increasingly struggled with alcoholism. Engle reacted by spending less time at home, traveling frequently to lecture and raise funds for the Writers' Workshop. The growing

reputation of the Workshop attracted talented writers from all parts of the United States—

including ~~the~~ Georgia writer [Flannery O'Connor](#), who gained a master of fine arts degree from the University of Iowa in 1947.

Engle also closely monitored the expansion of creative writing programs at other universities. On the one hand, these new programs showed the dynamism of the discipline and opened up employment opportunities for graduates of the Writers' Workshop. But on the other, they risked threatening the dominant position of the University of Iowa. This led Engle to intensify his fundraising efforts in order to bring not only American but also foreign writers to Iowa. In 1961 he edited *Midland*, a collection of short stories and poems produced in the Writers' Workshop. In addition to American writers, contributors from Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Ireland, and England were represented in the anthology.

In 1966 Engle resigned his directorship amid ~~st~~ tensions with literary scholars over funding and hiring practices. The following year, he founded the International Writing Program (IWP) with the Chinese writer Hualing Nieh. After divorcing his first wife, Engle married ~~Hualing~~ Nieh in 1971. The couple's efforts to welcome foreign writers at the University of Iowa and to create a global network of IWP alumni led them to be nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1976. In July 1977 Engle retired from his position as director of the IWP and was succeeded by ~~Hualing~~ Nieh. During his retirement, he continued to serve as consultant, working closely with his second wife.

Engle died in 1991 at Chicago's ~~O'Hare~~ airport, on his way to accept an award in Poland. At the time of his death, he had published more than a dozen books of poetry, a novel, a children's book, and a full-length libretto. He left an enduring mark on the institutionalization of creative writing. Engle often said that he preferred the company of successful businessmen to that of narrow-minded scholars and yet, it is among scholars that he spent most of his professional life.

Bibliography

Most of Engle's papers are at the University of Iowa and Coe College, Cedar Rapids. His correspondence with Random House can be found at Columbia University, New York City. His letters to the Rockefeller Foundation and Ford Foundation are held at the Rockefeller Archive Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York. Engle wrote about creative writing programs in his essay "The Writer and the Place" (1961; reprinted in Robert Dana's 1999 edited collection *A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop*) and in *On Creative Writing* (1964). Other sources include Stephen Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop: Origins, Emergence, & Growth* (1980); D. G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing since 1880* (1996); Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009); Loren Glass, "Middle Man: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop," *Minnesota Review* 71–72 (2009): 256–268; Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing During the Cold War* (2015). The documentary film *City of Literature* (2012) also explores Iowa City's literary legacy and Engle's role in developing the Writers' Workshop. Obituaries are in *The New York Times*, 25 March 1991; the *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 25 March 1991; and the *Independent* (London), 2 May 1991.

Lise Jaillant

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