

# LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE

MASSACHUSETTS LEVEL III HONORABLE MENTION 2009

Dear Robert Nathan,

Your poem “Ethiopia” contains one of the most poignant lines I have ever read. The speaker’s cry “Awake ye poets/ drowsy headed throng/ if freedom dies you will not sleep for long,” mirrors my beliefs about the role of an author and artist. I felt that your poem spoke about the events leading up to World War II and the policy of appeasement. Your poem, a call to arms, not only demands the wielding of a sword but a pen as well.

I have long felt that it is the duty of a writer to be, at times, a public conscience. You seem to say “Where were the poets while the politicians were appeasing evil powers?” Why were these poets not stirring a riot of words among the population? Were these artists so selfish that they were blind to their own stake in democracy? The line telling the poets to wake up is a brave admonishment, and it is totally justified. When I read the poem, I think to myself, as a young writer would not it be my duty to use my skills of observation and my love of truth to criticize a detrimental policy?

Your poem reinforced a core concept – that writers, like it or not, are often the voice of the people. Poets can speak about their personal experiences, but this function alone does not grant them a place in society. The poet must think of the mute masses and not “sleep,” as you say, in the face of injustice. I feel that throughout history there has been a group of aloof poets and artists who have not made a lasting impact on the public perception of the world. This is sad. Muckraking is not only for the essayists for the world, but the poets as well. Where is the *Guernica* of poetry to call for an intervention in Darfur? Where are the verses urging a withdrawal from Iraq? Is poetry relevant? Or will it be irrelevant until freedom dies and its revival is a necessity?

Why isn’t poetry mainstream today? Could it be that it doesn’t hold enough truth for the population? Has the poet stopped writing for the public conscience, stopped promoting their craft? “Ethiopia” draws so many questions from me.

The poetry of today is largely free verse, and it has been increasingly abstracted within the post-modern movement. Are these contemporary attributes compatible with the poet’s duty to champion justice, or have they led to the banishment of poetry as a lost art? I feel that poetry needs to be political again and carry more than an egocentric message. The public would come back to poetry for a dose of truth and world awareness.

First, however, as you say, the poets need to “awake.” There are so many ideas and desires in the mind of a creative person but these elements must be channeled in the face of injustice. Only then will freedom truly be safe. Thank you for bringing out these points and more. The warning you gave is just as relevant today as it was in your time!

Sincerely,

*Marissa*

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