

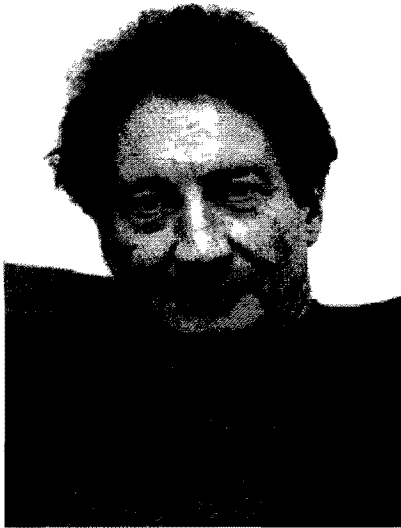
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Blumenthal is a literary lawyer

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Blumenthal

By ALLEN MENDENHALL

MORGANTOWN -- He publishes regularly in The New Yorker, The New York Times, The New Republic and The Nation.

He's the former director of creative writing at Harvard, recipient of multiple Fulbrights, author of seven books of poetry, a novel, a memoir, an essay collection and editor of two poetry anthologies.

He's the son of German-Jewish Holocaust refugees, a graduate of Cornell Law School, a former government attorney, and a translator of poetry and prose from German, French and Hungarian.

It seems the only thing Michael Blumenthal hasn't done is teach law.

Until now.

This fall, Blumenthal will return to the West Virginia University College of Law, where he taught this spring, to lecture as the Copenhaver Distinguished Visiting Chair.

Blumenthal, who calls his adult life "something of a bad imitation of such lawyer-poets as Wallace Stevens and Archibald MacLeish," is nothing if not adventurous, having recently spent a month in South Africa, for example, working with orphaned infant chacma baboons (yes, there is such a thing) at the C.A.R.E. foundation in Phalaborwa.

This exotic lawyer-cum-poet will teach law-and-literature, lawyers-and-psychology, and, among other hyphenated courses, lawyers-and-writers.

One doesn't have to believe that literature can serve as a source of insight for professionals -- especially for lawyers -- to realize the value of Blumenthal's presence on campus.

Indeed, his name recognition alone, however bound to writing, could come as a boost to WVU's ranking, which languishes somewhere in the third-tier. These rankings go a long way toward establishing a school's reputation nationally and internationally -- an important concern for today's increasingly globalized workforce.

Pomp and pedigree notwithstanding, we lawyers, most of us, would benefit from, if not a total immersion in literature, then at least a passing interest in it. And law students would profit from literature's moral lessons, to say nothing of its complex interpretive possibilities.

Astute readers of poetry, for instance, know how difficult it is to reduce a text, even a statute or supreme court opinion, to some transcendental, unconditioned meaning to blackletter law.

Those unfamiliar with Blumenthal's work can check out his newest book of poetry, which Philip Lopate calls "full throated" and "beautiful."

Grant Gilmore, a celebrated law professor, once informed an audience of 1Ls that "the lawyer's training progressively dehumanizes him until his remaining contact with the human race is tenuous indeed." This claim, coming from a man who devoted his life to law, should disturb any pensive law student, even if it is hyperbole. It's equally exaggerated to say Blumenthal's classes make students more human, whatever that means; but it's fair, I think, to say they challenge students in ways other classes can't.

"For those of us lucky, and blessed, enough in our misfortune," Blumenthal writes in his memoir *All My Mothers and Fathers*, "to be endowed with art's capacity to transform our wounds into a bow, there exists at least the possibility of redemption, the hope that we can instruct others through the small heroics of our own struggles."

Art and literature can, indeed, heal, and are especially instructive when they do so; but the making of art and literature, the aesthetic rendering of human experience, is not a little heroic -- it is, in the words of John Calvin, "a gift of God by no means to be despised, and a faculty worthy of commendation."

Editor's note: Author Allen Mendenhall is a graduate student at West Virginia University. He will complete the M.A. in English and J.D. degrees in 2009.

