

**THE RISE OF CREATIVE WRITING
AND THE NEW VALUE OF CREATIVITY**

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Prelude 0.0

The Most Beautiful Box of Cereal

Someone should write a dissertation about how one face is more attractive than another, because it's hard to explain how one face represents a more attractive idea, more desirable or useful, the way its eyes, the way its mouth just lies there like a small pretty sleeping animal. It's like how after a movie the first thing I have to talk about is whether or not I liked it. Because it was really sad and funny at the same time. Did you like it less than the other movie, the one that was sexy and funny? Have you noticed that you can see the movie playing on the faces in the audience if you turn around in the movie theater? Something funny happens on the screen—everyone is running after an animal—and you can see it on all the faces. Someone should write a dissertation about that. From the Latin *dissertare*, “continue to discuss,” as if a discussion wanted to go on forever, words leading only to...more words. I notice that some discussions are about something and some are not. For example, there's a discussion about the physical and spiritual benefits of ginger in my cereal. For example, there's Peace Cereal Raspberry Ginger Crisp and there's Nature's Path Organic Optimum Zen Cranberry & Ginger (For Inner Harmony). I'm holding both boxes and I have to choose one. Both have ginger coupled with a tasty red berry, but only one has Peace and only one has Zen. Have you noticed that cereal comes in a bag that is itself inside a box? When you think of a cereal, you think of the box, and when you finish eating the cereal, the box is still there. It's like the face of the cereal, and it's so attractive that even when you put the box in the bin to be recycled, it's still there. It's even in your sleep, like a face that you sleep with.

Movement 1.0

Thinking Outside Creative Writing

The Trouble with Institutional Success

Why so much anxiety about Creative Writing? Those who position themselves outside this academic field often attack it with polemical venom; those willing to admit they're insiders often seem defensive or embarrassed. Perhaps the anxiety would be less noticeable if the field weren't growing so robustly. Particularly in the last several decades, it has flourished into a stable institutional entity. Like pioneer towns that have filled up a once-empty map with dots, Creative Writing programs have been established at most reputable colleges and universities across the U.S. Academia is not only willing to give Creative Writing a prominent place in the humanities, it's expected by now to have already done so. According to the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP), the total number of degree programs in Creative Writing, at both the undergraduate and graduate level, has increased from 80 in 1975, to 790 in 2008 (Fenza, "A Brief History"). The rate of growth is fairly evenly distributed across this three decade span, so there's no sign of the growth subsiding. The only limit on this field's expansion, it appears, is the finite number of existing institutions where Creative Writing programs can set up shop.

Anxiety about the field often focuses on one perplexing, contentious question: why has this boom been occurring? If it's true that students want to take classes and earn degrees in Creative Writing, and that administrators are giving the students what they want, what produces this popularity and legitimacy? Why has the experience of writing creatively acquired such a high value in the academic world? It's now commonplace to bash the field's success, in particular to

accuse it of killing literature by building an ivy-covered wall between literature and a public who no longer reads it, or just by producing too much bad writing. My purpose here is not to join this chorus of naysayers; in fact, I applaud AWP executive director David Fenza, the field's most notable defender, for responding to these critiques and demonstrating how flimsy they can be. I think Creative Writing classes and degree programs should not only exist, they should thrive. They provide excellent educational and professional opportunities, and I myself have benefited enormously from them as both student and teacher. I also think there's plenty of compelling literary writing being made these days, even if it does have a tiny audience.

What has been missing from the impressive success story of Creative Writing is an equally strong attention to its pedagogy and theory; in other words, the field has tended to avoid thinking about how it teaches and what assumptions it has about language and literature. This lack, I argue, is tied to a larger confusion about Creative Writing's situation in American society—particularly about why this academic field is growing while literary reading, according to a 2004 National Endowment for the Arts study, is in "dramatic decline" (United States). The answer, simply put, is that the kind of creative skills practiced in Creative Writing are valued because they're increasingly used as a productive force in the post-industrial knowledge economy. Books of poetry and fiction may not sell well, but creativity and "thinking outside the box" have become primary tools for production in the American theater of the global economy. This doesn't mean that the field is an insidious agent of capitalism and that its students and teachers are controlled by this system. It means that Creative Writing has much more social and economic relevance than is commonly perceived, and that the field has remarkable opportunities to shape the conditions not only of literary production, but more broadly, the production of everyday language.

Thinking Outside Creative Writing

Those who have an opinion about this academic field often talk about it as if it were a kind of inexplicable enclave, separate from the major social dynamics of recent decades. The defenders often argue that it thrives as a humanistic alternative to a cliché-saturated consumer culture and to a specialized jargon-ridden liberal arts curriculum. Those who critique it often argue that Creative Writing diminishes the power and public relevance of literature: while traditionalists accuse the field of failing to encourage public appreciation of a selective literary canon, critics associated with the avant-garde accuse Creative Writing of failing to fight against oppressive institutional or corporate forces. Both kinds of censure suggest that higher education prevents average people from accessing the real benefits of literary activity.

These critiques also tend to condemn Creative Writing for fostering an opportunistic careerism, a bloated bureaucracy throwing scraps of meat to wanna-be writers who've built the most impressive CVs. But even these arguments about the field's frenzied professionalization frame it as a subsidized industry artificially protected by the academy. John Barr, president of the enormously well-endowed Poetry Foundation, for example, recently bemoaned the expansion of MFA programs, arguing that the awful effect is too much poetry with too little variety, "a poetry that is neither robust, resonant, nor—and I stress this quality—entertaining; a poetry that both starves and flourishes on academic subsidies." There's a pervasive assumption, I think, that the growth of this field is a kind of paradox, an institutional anomaly whereby higher education mysteriously provides a safe haven to literary writers seeking refuge from the decline of literature's value in the marketplace, as if these institutions were devoted to conserving endangered disciplines rather than rewarding those disciplines that are popular among students.

It's true, of course, that readership for traditional categories of literature, especially poetry, is remarkably small despite the growth of Creative Writing programs. But this becomes a less perplexing enigma if we consider that being skilled at using language creatively has become

a valuable asset for a wide range of jobs. In fact, a number of recent books that analyze the global economy—some of them bestsellers—provide abundant evidence that creativity is becoming a crucial means of production as well as a product for consumption. Whether these authors embrace capitalism as an ideal engine of growth and freedom, or critique it as an engine of inequity and alienation, they agree that globalization is changing the U.S. from an industrial, material economy into a creative, immaterial economy. Thomas L. Friedman's *The World Is Flat* and Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* are among a new wave of business-friendly tomes that examine how an increasing number of American workers are valued not for their ability to produce *things* but to produce concepts, emotions, lifestyles, and experiences—and this class of workers increasingly wants to consume those same abstract products. Much more skeptical about the global networking of capital and power (and far less widely read), recent Marxist works like Hardt & Negri's *Empire* or Paolo Virno's *The Grammar of the Multitude*, also call attention to the new flexible workplace that rewards imagination and communication.

This is the social context that really begins to explain the rise of Creative Writing. The skills that have the most value in the new economy are often those practiced in this academic field—including the ability to manipulate language, to affect audiences in powerful ways, and to craft evocative stories, characters, images, and voices. Of course, English departments are not listing courses called "Creative Writing for future CEOs," and students who want to go into corporate marketing don't usually take a Creative Writing class because they see it as career training. Indeed, students may be more likely to seek out these classes as an escape from commercialism, an opportunity to practice communication skills that haven't "sold out" to the marketplace. While Creative Writing can and does function as such a libratory space, too few of us are willing to consider how rapidly and thoroughly post-industrial America has taken on a creative ethos, how that desire for escape from commercialism has itself become a commodity, and how many of our students are actually receiving valuable training for the new economy. By

examining this social position and understanding its increasing institutional privilege and power, Creative Writing can develop more effective teaching practices, and take responsibility for its part in determining how language is used and who has access to it.

Exceptionalism

In many ways the Creative Writing boom is counter-intuitive. Writing poems and stories is supposed to be frivolous and impractical, something for daydreamers, rebels, and outsiders. In higher education, the humanities are supposed to be retreating as more funding pours into disciplines related to science, technology, and business. In this light, Creative Writing presents itself as a felicitous aberration, an attractive alternative to the more dominant trend to give students a rational, technical, corporate-friendly skill set.

This is how I've always seen the field myself, ever since I first walked into a Creative Writing classroom in my final year as an undergraduate student. At first it was hard to believe that I could receive academic credit for writing poetry, and I felt the buzz of secretly getting away with something, a mild giddiness tinged with guilt about taking a class that promised to be so fun. I soon immersed myself in writing and reading poetry, and immediately after graduation I entered an MFA program, largely to pursue this new writing life, but also to avoid a deadening corporate or government job. I'm guessing that many students in this field have also felt that they were choosing an alternative to drudgery.

Now when I teach these courses to undergraduate students, I ask them on the first day of class why they and so many other students are eager to sign up. Overwhelmingly the answers resemble my own motivations for taking Creative Writing: my students want freedom from an oppressive curriculum that demands too much rote critical thinking, dry textual analysis, and

academic prose strangled by thesis statements and Strunk & White correctness. As a teacher I feel that same buzz of liberation, partly because my students seem so happy to be there, but also because I feel less pressure to teach and evaluate them according to conventional standards. None of us in this field can quite understand why this freedom is allowed to exist in an institutional environment still apparently controlled by those standards, but we also know that understanding is not necessary, because here we are, and we're in demand. We can accept that mystery at the core of Creative Writing as long as it continues to succeed.

This view of the field as a mysterious exception informs the narrative Creative Writing often tells about itself. In "A Brief History of the AWP," for example, Fenza frames the early attempts to bring literary "practitioners" into English departments alongside scholars and critics as a "radical notion" that ran against the major current in the discipline: "By offering classes in creative writing, academe has, ironically, reclaimed an aspect of literary study that it had divested when its humanities departments became specialized." Fenza also suggests a larger social context that's made these classes "among the most popular...in the humanities." Although students often "feel that the world is not of their making, and not theirs to form and reform," Fenza says that Creative Writing offers students the opportunity to take more control of their own lives through language and imagination skills. It's a unique space to "exercise and strengthen the resourcefulness of the human will, and it is the exercise of will not *over* others, but *for* others, as stories and poems are made as gifts for readers and listeners" ("A Brief History"). Here Fenza sets the field apart not only from other academic fields but also from commodity culture in general. In the Creative Writing classroom, poems and stories are not passively consumed but actively created; and they're exchanged not for profit but as a "humane" gesture that asks for nothing in return.

This mission statement for AWP situates Creative Writing in the Romantic tradition of the artist as outsider, set apart from the standardized triteness of institutions. In a *Poets and*

Writers article called "Workshop: A Revolution of Sensibility," Jane Ciabattari echoes this view, noting that early "pioneers in the field" conceived it as "better preparation for adulthood than certain pragmatic, career-focused curricula, such as business or pre-law" (69). In another essay called "Creative Writing & Its Discontents," Fenza reinforces the argument that the field is outside the marketplace: "Like other lessons of creative writing—in creativity, empathy, persuasive expression, and aesthetic discernment—the artistic experience of the will's efficacy may seem too rarefied a goal for a practical age that prefers to quantify success in patents, cures, sales units, and dollars."

Both Fenza and Ciabattari argue for the legitimacy of Creative Writing by framing it as a radical alternative whose unique non-commercial appeal has emerged like an oasis in a desert of oppressive academic and cultural forces. This line of thinking recuperates the traditional defense of the humanities: a liberal arts education is supposed to be valuable not because it has direct utility for future employment, but because it makes well-rounded humans with well-developed minds and spirits. Except that now Creative Writing doesn't align itself with the rest of the humanities, which is seen as a misguided bastard selling-out to academic jargon and elitist intellectualism. Rather, Creative Writing offers the alternative path back to the original, authentic mission of the liberal arts. What I propose in this essay is that the familiar opposition between cultivated humanism and vulgar marketplace, between impractical creativity and practical profitability, is rapidly disappearing, and this disappearance has contributed to the Creative Writing boom.

Attacks from Traditionalists

In the one comprehensive history of the field, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*, D.G. Myers agrees that Creative Writing should carry the torch of traditional liberal arts education, but he argues that it dropped that torch long ago and has now lost its way in the

dark night of literary bureaucracy and business. The field's founding goal, says Myers, was to promote a writerly approach to the study of literature within increasingly specialized English departments. Creative Writing was conceived as "a conservative reform" that "emerged as a challenge to professionalization," and as "a humanistic argument that literature is not a genre of knowledge but a mode of aesthetic and spiritual cultivation" (7). As the field expanded during the post-World War II expansion of American higher education, argues Myers, it forgot its original purpose, losing its early pedagogical mission and its ties to literary tradition, becoming a greedy system of patronage focused on professionalizing itself to consolidate institutional power.

The most well-known attacks against Creative Writing make a similar argument, but without the good-idea-gone-bad motif. When it comes to the academization of literary writing, people like Dana Gioia and Donald Hall have nothing good to say, and they've gained lots of attention by dismissing Creative Writing summarily as a malignant growth. Gioia's still famously controversial essay, "Can Poetry Matter?", claims bluntly that "poetry has vanished as a cultural force in America," and that the primary perpetrator of this thievery is Creative Writing, whose booming growth has paradoxically turned serious literature into an insular, self-absorbed, self-sustaining subculture. Institutional success has actually directed poetry inward rather than outward to a larger public audience, says Gioia; but his smooth populist rhetoric reveals its elitism when he argues that solutions to poetry's insularity should include a return to tougher evaluative criticism and more selective anthologies so readers won't be turned off by mediocrity.

Hall's tirade against Creative Writing, "Poetry and Ambition," first published almost a quarter century ago, is delightfully pugnacious and sensational, at one point even proclaiming, "Abolish the M.F.A.!" Particularly concerned about a decline in the quality and ambition of poetry, Hall places blame squarely on the Creative Writing workshop, which "schools us to produce the McPoem," that fast food assembly-line literature that's abundant in quantity but lacking in nutrients and artistic merit. Hall smartly locates the field in the context of American

consumer culture—which rewards instant gratification and disposability, transforming all things into standardized commodities—but he forgets that poems, even McPoems, don't sell like Big Macs. Virtually no poets, and few fiction writers, can earn more than a poverty-level income solely by publishing their literary works. Which brings us back to that pesky question: what is the real value of Creative Writing, if not its poems and stories? Hall still ends up where Gioia does, complaining about the boom without addressing why it's happening.

Attacks from the Avant-Garde

The Hall-Gioia argument might be called traditional or conservative in its nostalgia for the refined, selective greatness of past literature, but those who affiliate with a more radical sensibility also like to attack Creative Writing for selling out to dominant forms of power. Among these academy-bashings is Christopher Beach's, *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry between Community and Institution*, which candidly reveals its opposition to "the overly conventional mindset and conservative institutional orientation governing much of the production, dissemination, and discussion of poetry in this country." This problem, he claims, "has been in large part created and perpetuated by the growing creative-writing industry and its satellite structures (journals, presses, reading series, prizes, writers' conferences)" (18). Although Beach pits himself against traditionalists like Gioia and Hall, he joins them in demonizing Creative Writing, except that for Beach the idealized alternative is not a high culture canon of literary excellence but radical poetry communities such as Language poets and slam poets. While he makes many cogent points, Beach fails to acknowledge that an avant-garde community is no less vulnerable to commodification than an established academic field—anyone who turns on a

TV can find commercials promising access to various “radical” communities, access gained by purchasing a certain brand of car, clothing, or computer.

Mark Nowak makes a critical move similar to Beach’s in his unabashedly polemical essay, “Neoliberalism, Collective Action, and the American MFA Industry,” a scathing indictment against what he calls “the multimillion-dollar conglomeration of state and private enterprises within the neoliberal language industry that has developed in continuum with the crisis of global capitalism over the past four decades” (section 1). Dismissing Creative Writing as completely defective and impossible to reform, Nowak proposes “[c]ollectively run, non-academic radical writers’ workshops” (section 9) as an alternative; while he offers informed examples of such workshops, he also relies on the notion of a pure, uncommodifiable space for creativity, and I’m not convinced that such a space can exist. My argument in this essay has much in common with those of Beach and Nowak, but their oppositional stances toward Creative Writing perpetuate an outdated myth that artists can operate outside the marketplace while attacking the insiders. No writing site can transcend capital—that’s why Nowak’s positioning of the “MFA industry” within neoliberalism’s total privatization of society is so important. It’s also necessary, however, to acknowledge that there is no safe external position that’s totally liberated from these market forces. Any writers’ workshop, whether academic or non-academic, has links to a larger socioeconomic system, along with a responsibility to understand those links and to promote ethical action within that system. Critiques of Creative Writing as a crass business of aspiring professional writers and teachers are often misguided not because that schmoozey opportunism doesn't exist, but because those critiques distract attention from the larger conditions that produce this “biz.” Non-academic sites of literary activity trade in the value of creativity as well, even if the profit to be made is not obvious or immediate.

Acknowledging that all creative spaces can be commodified leads to a profound opportunity to understand our social role as writers, then act in responsible ways without

pretending to escape that role. Just because Creative Writing has enjoyed enormous institutional success does not mean that the field is doomed to churn out consumerized zombie writers. This field, like any other, can recognize and respond to its ongoing relationship to economic forces—seen not only in the vocations of teaching, publishing, and bookselling, as Nowak rightly points out—but increasingly in a much broader range of post-industrial vocations, such as advertising, marketing, public relations, new media, information technology, product development and design, as well as management, human resources, business consulting, and so on. What critics often forget is that the vast majority of undergraduate and graduate Creative Writing students never publish a book or become a teacher. Instead, they move into other fields that harness creative literacy to produce concepts, emotions, and lifestyles—including “radical” brand identities.

Creativity: Buzzword of the Business World

Among the most convincing pieces of evidence that creativity has rising market value is Daniel H. Pink's article, "The MFA Is the New MBA," published not in *Poets and Writers* magazine—it's worth noting—but in *Harvard Business Review*. Explaining that "corporate recruiters have begun visiting the top arts grad schools," Pink boldly declares that "an arts degree is now perhaps the hottest credential in the world of business." Why? Because the basic financial skills learned in MBA programs are quickly becoming obsolete in the U.S. as those tasks are outsourced to cheaper labor markets across the globe. The tasks that remain for American workers increasingly involve creativity. As Pink says, "the demand for artistic aptitude is surging" because "businesses are realizing that the only way to differentiate their goods and services in today's overstocked, materially abundant marketplace is to make their offerings transcendent—physically beautiful and emotionally compelling." Pink is also the author of *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*, which argues that

"the future belongs" not to the rational, left-brain number-crunchers but to the right-brain thinkers, the "creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. These people—artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers—will now reap society's richest rewards" (1).

Pink's ideas about the new right-brain economy are given prominent space in Thomas L. Friedman's perennial bestseller, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. Surveying the new flattened, free-marketized, instantaneous world of globalization, Friedman dubs our historical moment the "New Age of Creativity" (50), primarily because communications technology now gives people unprecedented opportunity for "authoring their own content" (55), particularly in easily manipulated digital format. Friedman uses the term "author" in this context a number of times, and it's worth considering how short a leap it might be from the new authors of the digital networks to the new authors of the Creative Writing workshops. Explaining how American workers can succeed in the flat world, Friedman urges us to develop our creative talents, because these will make us "untouchables" (276) in an economy geared more toward adding value to basic goods and services.

Joining Pink and Friedman is the more academically-credentialed Richard Florida, whose much-referenced book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, also makes bold claims for the value of creativity, calling it "the most highly prized commodity in our economy" (5). Using sociological methods, Florida studies "creative workers," the new dominant class of labor, who "by the turn of the new century...included nearly a third of the workforce," and who nonetheless generate "nearly half of all wage and salary income in the United States" (xiv). Florida frequently distinguishes the new power class from its predecessor: whereas "the lifestyle of the previous organizational age emphasized conformity, the new lifestyle favors individuality, self-statement, acceptance of difference and the desire for rich multidimensional experiences" (13). This shift corresponds to a mending of the split between bourgeoisie and bohemian, mainstream and

alternative, work ethic and Romantic hedonism—a mending that Florida embraces as the new ground for the twenty-first century creative economy. As "old categories" continue to vanish, Florida imagines work that can be "more aesthetic and experiential," as well as "spiritual and 'useful' in the poetic sense rather than in the duty-bound sense" (202).

Another market-friendly advocate of creativity, the National Center on Education and the Economy, recently published a report on skills required by American workers in the era of globalization. Headed by a reputable commission of former cabinet secretaries, superintendents of schools, and CEOs, this study calls for a thorough revamping of the American education system in response to the decline of industrialism. To maintain economic "leadership," says the report, America must not only focus on technological advances; more importantly, success "depends on a deep vein of creativity that is constantly renewing itself" (NCEE 6). As this creative business activity replaces "low-skill work," which is outsourced to cheap labor markets abroad, the U.S. is better able to compete "in the worldwide market for high-value-added products and services" (NCEE 3).

But wait. Isn't creativity supposed to be a tool for liberating us from the soulless, heartless rationality of the workplace and marketplace? Isn't creativity supposed to be an alternative to oppressive corporate culture? What does it mean that all these pro-business pundits embrace artful innovation? One could argue that the kind of creativity harnessed by global capital is different from the authentic, non-commercial creativity found in poetry and other rigorous art forms. Of course, there can be many definitions, functions, and effects of creativity, and I'm convinced that there is abundant artistic activity today that's vital, intelligent, and critical of dominant powers. It's also true, however, that the meanings of creativity and work are undergoing vast transformations. Creative work can produce a book of poems, for example, that will never appear on a bestseller list, and that lack of marketability may be central to some

people's definition of creativity. But that's not preventing an increasing number of other people from thinking about creative work as central to generating economic value.

New Critiques of Capital, and the Power of Creative Literacy

The privatization of creativity can have dangerous effects, including the undermining of public dissent that's often associated with artistic activity. If advertisements can so eloquently and effectively claim the status of "revolutionary" for their hamburgers and cell phone plans, if what once seemed like a tool for liberation has transformed into a corporate tool, then there's less public space for creative dissent.

A number of new Marxist theorists have observed the same socioeconomic changes as Pink, Friedman, and Florida, but with less optimism about the effects of these changes on people and community. Paolo Virno, for example, in *The Grammar of the Multitude*, studies the commodification of human communication itself, not only as seen in consumerism, but also in our work. Virno agrees with the business-friendly commentators that "the most relevant productive forces of society, the productive forces which every contemporary work process must draw" are "linguistic competence, knowledge, imagination, etc." (60). The language worker of this late stage of capital Virno calls the "virtuoso," a kind of performing artist whose activities require an audience but don't generate a tangible product. Virtuosos make up a new creative labor force that provides linguistic services rather than material goods, which are increasingly produced by fully automated machines or by exploited workers in the non-Western world" (59). Not disciplined by the rational and rigid system of assembly-line industrialism, the virtuoso is imaginative and inventive, flexible and informal, able to improvise and adjust to an accelerating barrage of shocks and changes, able to think in non-linear, non-hierarchical ways. For Virno, the subsumption of virtuoso skills by capital has the effect of devastating community and public communication, but the same conditions that give virtuosity so much market value also give it

potential for countering capital in effective new ways. A liberated virtuosity, he argues, could begin to reclaim the publicness of the public sphere through inventive new modes of dissent, and yet this dissent can't pretend to transcend market forces. Virno's ideas directly apply to Creative Writing if we begin to think about the writers' workshop as a training ground for virtuosic skills. Because the virtuoso is not inevitably pure or impure, the classroom can be a space where students and teachers keep working to reclaim these skills.

In their ambitious study of new configurations of power and capital, *Empire*, Hardt & Negri also call attention to the shift from modern industrialization to postmodern "informatization" (280). Since the early 1970s, especially in dominant capitalist countries like the U.S., workers are more likely to produce "knowledge, information, affect, and communication" (285) than material goods. Hardt & Negri call this proliferating class "immaterial labor" (290), and the organizational model for this kind of production is a virtual network that keeps adjusting to change spontaneously and creatively, no longer relying on rigid hierarchies or boundaries of space and time. Although not trapped in the tedium of industrial factory jobs, the network labor force answers to a new kind of corporate command, because "control of laboring activity can potentially be individualized and continuous in the virtual panopticon of network production" (297). For Hardt & Negri, the workplace that's innovative, flexible, and open—while at the same time imposing more effective control—corresponds to the more general structure of the "society of control," a new configuration of power "in which mechanisms of command become ever more 'democratic'... distributed throughout the brains and bodies of the citizens" (23). The primary tools for this distribution, they argue, are new technologies of communication, new techniques for manipulating and delivering the language of word and image.

This is why creative language skills have become so valuable in the current phase of American capitalism, and this is also why, I argue, courses in writing creatively have become so popular in the academy. Students are savvy enough to understand how powerful creative literacy

has become in our current social context. Whether they see Creative Writing as rebelliously impractical or career-mindedly practical or just a fun way to earn credit, they want access to its power. What's often missing from their education is more formal study of why it has acquired such high value, and what the implications of this high value are. As Hardt & Negri argue, "if communication has increasingly become the fabric of production...then control over linguistic sense and meaning and the networks of communication becomes an ever more central issue for political struggle" (404). If "empire" operates first of all through language, by alienating individuals from the language they use, then language itself must be reappropriated, language itself is the means of production that must be seized.

The Consumerized University, Workshopping, and Competition for Cultural Capital

What I'm trying to demonstrate is that Creative Writing is tied to economic production and consumption in ways that aren't commonly acknowledged. This academic field is not an institutional or social anomaly, nor is it an island of high culture or rebellion in a sea of commercialism. It has benefited from recent transformations in the economy as well as the broad shift in higher education toward marketization. Bill Readings explores this shift in his prescient 1996 book, *The University in Ruins*, declaring cynically that the academy has become a "consumer-oriented corporation" (11). No longer primarily the inculcator of national culture, the new "University of Excellence" pursues customer satisfaction, absorbing and managing any diversity or radicalism in the name of innovation" (32). As this University of Excellence has risen to prominence, so too has Creative Writing, a point that Paul Dawson makes convincingly in his 2005 book, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*. This important study of the field's historical and institutional position also invokes Florida's concept of the "creative class," asserting that Creative Writing satisfies the values of this class—"individuality, meritocracy, and diversity and openness"—and is therefore popular within "the market-oriented university system,

where student (or consumer) choice has a large influence on curricular structure and course offerings” (46). While Dawson is mostly an advocate for Creative Writing, he understands that it’s not an insulated outpost of aesthetic activity.

This connection to larger forces in higher education and the economy goes unacknowledged in Creative Writing’s dominant pedagogy, which tends to perpetuate the myth of the field’s separateness. What’s called “the workshop method”—a group evaluation of student writings—reflects that apparent institutional isolation by treating literary works as self-contained objects to be judged for aesthetic merit. Workshopping is a vestige of New Criticism’s method of “close reading” that took hold of English departments just as Creative Writing programs were first established (most famously at the University of Iowa) in the late 30s and 40s. Like New Critical close reading, the workshop method presents itself as objectively analyzing literary technique, and yet the implicit goal for both methods is to judge how good or bad a literary work is. This evaluative impulse engenders competition and inequities of authority, reproducing the marketplace while claiming to be outside of it. The workshop method thrives on aesthetic battles—particularly that grand battle between the traditional and the radical—which means it tends to pit students against each other so that the “free market” of the workshop discussion can determine the value of poems and stories.

What’s at stake in these literary struggles? Pierre Bourdieu’s landmark sociological study of the peculiar economy of literature, *The Field of Cultural Capital*, contends that aesthetic oppositions—between the old and the new, the middlebrow and the avant-garde, the orthodox and the heretical, the commercial and the non-commercial—are not struggles for some pure space of artistic freedom and authenticity, although they present themselves as such. Instead, the struggles determine the whole of literary production as a field of position-taking and competition for what Bourdieu calls “cultural capital”—the value of cultural prestige and the power to determine what is culturally valuable. In his words, “the fundamental stake in literary struggles is the monopoly

of literary legitimacy...the monopoly of the power to say with authority who are authorized to call themselves writers; or to put it another way, it is the monopoly of the power to consecrate producers or products” (42).

This competition for legitimacy is built into the workshop method, and it is this structure itself that needs to be reconceived and reorganized. The reappropriation of language in the age of "empire" cannot simply manifest as a fight for a certain aesthetic—be it traditional, avant-garde, or other. If creative literacy has become a primary tool for global capital, then the writing workshop is a particularly important space where control over those skills can be negotiated—not by evaluating products, not by giving “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” to literary works, but by helping students to develop an ongoing writing practice.

MFA Regret

Why should Creative Writing change if things are going so well for it? I suggest that the field may be prospering not *because of* but *despite* its lack of pedagogical and theoretical reflexivity. These courses are certainly popular on campus, but students may often not be getting what they really want or need from that education in creativity. There's a widespread affliction I call "MFA regret," often suffered by those who have graduated from an MFA program. It's the realization that the great expectations about going through that program just never took shape. There may be many causes of this disappointment, but I propose that it's tied primarily to workshop pedagogy—how that group evaluation can squeeze the enthusiasm, pleasure, and adventure out of the writing process, how it can stunt student progress in so many ways, especially with premature critical scrutiny and the promise of instant success. Most MFA degree-holders I've met don't dismiss the experience entirely, but often there's an undercurrent of cynicism in their voices, and perhaps some embarrassment that they've been "institutionalized."

Rarely have I heard anyone express strong commitment to their MFA experience, except to say something like, "it was nice to have time to write."

Rick Moody has made one of the most notable public expressions of MFA regret. In an essay called "Writers and Mentors," while narrating his literary education, he lambastes the safe, assembly-line, "corporate" workshop he encountered as an MFA student at Columbia. This prevalent classroom model, Moody suggests, is really "creative writing by committee," which like a public opinion "focus group" only finds the mediocre, the common denominator, and is really "about sales and marketing...about pitching your story or poem or essay to the audience in such a way that the response will be predictable, measurable, and easily understood" (4). Moody punctuates this critique of homogenizing tendencies with a compelling warning: "We need to be alert in the workshop setting to the problems inherent in the very structure of the workshop" (5).

Maybe institutions are always disappointing, but it seems to me that disappointment is particularly severe among Creative Writing students, particularly when compared to the giddy enthusiasm they feel when first entering this path of study. It's hard to believe that students are jazzed about taking these courses because they get to sit around a table endlessly picking apart each other's work, making comments like, "This word is interesting, but maybe it's a little too light for a poem about death." How many of us have confessed privately to each other that these kinds of discussions feel pointless and even painful? How many students leave the classroom feeling frustrated, confused, unsatisfied, or just profoundly bored by the wishy-washy, "I like this, I don't like this" minutiae of these critiques?

A particularly harsh and humorous account of the workshop method can be found in Francine Prose's 2000 novel, *Blue Angel*, which depicts Creative Writing students at a small New England college as petty, competitive brats fighting for the right to call themselves literary winners by proclaiming their fellow students losers. The novel shows equal disdain for the "timid microsurgery" of workshopping (11) as it does for the violent eruptions that regularly pierce

through the safe equivocation with “reckless bloodletting” (184). Perhaps most disturbing about Prose’s depiction is how the workshop method generates a system of retribution, whereby those who are attacked in turn attack their attackers. No one seems to care about the actual writing under discussion because everyone is desperately clawing for a little piece of workshop authority and status. The novel’s pessimistic account culminates with this gloomy passage: “What maniac invented this torture, this punishment for young writers? Imagine a group of established authors subjecting themselves to this! It’s not an academic discipline, it’s fraternity hazing. And the most appalling part is that its supposed to be helpful. The bound and gagged sacrificial lamb is supposed to be grateful” (199).

Creative Writing thrives not because this kind of traditional workshop dynamic is exceptionally popular or useful. Instead, students are willing to bear the disappointments of this model because they have such enormous desire to write creatively while earning college credit or institutional legitimacy, because even if they don’t find as much value in reading and studying literature, they value creativity and language.

From Workshop to Practice: Writing Can Be Taught

It’s remarkable that the workshop method has so thoroughly dominated Creative Writing pedagogy for over half a century, because there’s so much else that can happen in that course. Many new teachers understand this, and they are infusing energy into the field and developing new classroom models. A number of recently published books and essays propose smart new pedagogical and theoretical frameworks for Creative Writing. The field may already be reaching a moment of widespread transformation, in which case I’m just trying to accelerate and formalize that process.

No longer willing to believe the canon-making myth that writing can’t be taught, or that talent is supplied only to a chosen few by transcendent forces, many teachers are trying to shape

the learning experiences of students more actively and intentionally. Teachers are helping students to improve as writers—not simply by training them to pronounce what’s good and bad—but by guiding them through rigorous practice of diverse writing strategies with carefully developed assignments, exercises, thought experiments, readings, and discussions. This means a shift from group evaluations of individual writings to a wide range of activities that help students develop skills and experience as writers while they examine the larger conditions of that writing. A new pedagogy could *front-load* classes with interventions in the writing process before it begins and while it's happening, instead of the more traditional *back-loading*—that is, intervening after a written product already exists.

Rather than hammering out literary verdicts like a jury, students can study the many aesthetic approaches they can make to any writing situation, without needing to choose one approach as a stable identity. Rather than having the appearance of freedom—to express whatever identity they've already acquired—students can discover another kind of freedom by practicing creative skills that they wouldn't otherwise choose or know how to practice. Rather than finding their "one true voice" (or losing that one voice, if the workshop evaluation is negative enough), students can gain access to many different voices. Rather than claiming ownership of one supposedly authentic brand of speaking, they can be encouraged to question the notion that such authenticity is available. Rather than learning through competition, they can learn through collaboration, as members of a group that collectively encounters a series of writing tasks and critical activities, that studies past and present models, all with judgment suspended. This collaborative environment can help students better understand how language is a social force, and how their writing practice functions in a social context.

Pedagogical reform can be expedited if Creative Writing is willing to borrow from the intellectual work done by other fields, particularly in English: Composition offers teaching methods that approach writing as a process, helping students to generate, develop, organize, and

revise their material; and Literary Studies offers critical methods for understanding how certain discourses operate in the context of history and society. Collaboration between these fields could result in a Creative Writing course in which students actually work on their writing (as visual art students actually work on their art in studio classes) while they become more conscious of the social dimension of that practice. It's important to emphasize that other academic fields should learn from Creative Writing as well; conventional academic prose is often impoverished and ineffective, and the entire academy would do well to turn to Creative Writing for new strategies of creative communication. Ground-clearing for this kind of collaboration has already been done by several commentators, including Paul Dawson, Tim Mayers, and Joe Amato & H. Kassia Fleisher, whose work has made substantial contributions to a nascent body of reflexive criticism about Creative Writing. Without rejecting the field entirely, all these reform proposals maintain that literary writing is not simply a private act of individual talent but a public act that participates in public life. This social dimension exists not only in some idealized non-institutional utopia; it also needs to be found and nurtured inside the academy, which means that Creative Writing cannot pretend to be anti-academic, and other fields need to recognize its academic legitimacy.

Reclaiming Creative Literacy in the Classroom

I want to be clear that I don't think Creative Writing has become a training ground solely for market-oriented language workers in the value-added economy. If the field's boom in cultural capital ties it more directly to post-industrial consumer culture than is often recognized, this also means that Creative Writing can help people gain more control and understanding of their means of communication. Literary practice always has both the potential to alienate people from their own language and to strengthen the relationship between people and their language. The fact that Creative Writing has emerged in an institutional setting doesn't mean that it's absolutely authentic or inauthentic, liberatory or oppressive. The field has, however, lagged in its development of a

reflexive theoretical framework that would make it more aware of its real social value and its real social effects, and this lag has encouraged further lag in revisions of its teaching methods.

We can't pretend any longer that Creative Writing is always radically "thinking outside the box" of commodified language, but it's also not useful to accuse that field of being trapped "inside the box" of a corporatized institution. Just as aesthetic battles pitting traditionalist consent against avant-garde dissent won't fix the workshop system, Creative Writing doesn't benefit from polemical arguments that either celebrate its pure virtues or castigate its hopeless impurities. No position is absolute, and every position, including the Creative Writing classroom, can develop strategies to give people access to creative literacy. As Walter Benjamin says in his essay, "The Author as Producer," there is "only one demand" on the writer, "the demand *to think*, to reflect on his position in the process of production" (236) The Creative Writing workshop, then, can encourage students to understand themselves as producers, reflecting on the practice of making stories and poems while considering the changing values, meanings, and functions of that practice in society.

Interlude 1.1

Minus Sign

"Add this. It is to add."

--Wallace Stevens

"Add This To Rhetoric"

*"It is not something added to the real
world—not a decorative element, so to
speak. On the contrary, it is the very
heart of society's real unreality."*

--Guy Debord

The Society of the Spectacle (13)

*"The absence of evidence is not
evidence of absence."*

--Donald Rumsfeld

I heard someone say once that suicide might be the ultimate expression of agency. If you subtract yourself from the living, you make a compelling choice. When I was in third grade we were supposed to learn to subtract by carrying numbers from one column to the next, but I just couldn't do it. I could imagine hoisting the number up on my shoulder and trying to cross over, but the distance was too great. Then I started working on a PhD and one day I heard a student ask the post-colonialist if living authors are offended by the concept of "the death of the author." He stared right through her with a look of disbelief on his face and said, "I don't give a flying fuck." Whenever I think of this moment I find myself wondering about this phrase, "flying fuck." I imagine a fuck flying through the air, with all that freedom, but then paradoxically I feel trapped inside a box with that fuck because I can't stop thinking about it. I would like to be outside the box—above, below, alongside it—but I find out there is no outside. It's all in here—the trees, the furniture, the garbage, which is mostly packaging for the food we eat. Also, the post-colonialist and the flying fuck. On a notepad there is the author's name and some writing. I move close

enough to read. It says, "I am not feeling well today. I think I should not leave the house. My feet feel like pieces of fruit that have ripened too quickly, and my breath is like rotten juice." Whoever wrote this is apparently no longer present. I look around for something to eat, but all I can do is think, why would someone feel the need to write this? Why not just think it? And as I think each of these words, they are subtracted from my thinking, one by one, until there is no more evidence of my talent.

Movement 1.1

What Is Creative Literacy?

The Promises of Creative Literacy

Creative literacy is the term I give to the skills and experience that students can gain from taking a Creative Writing class. It's not only the ability to make literary works, but more generally: the ability to use language (along with visual images and many other media) to produce complex emotional and psychological states in an audience; the ability to think and communicate in associative, metaphorical, non-linear, non-hierarchical ways; the ability to craft evocative stories with fully realized characters, personas, voices; the ability to manipulate or destabilize received meanings and to produce new meanings. *Creative literacy* is also the term I give to a newly dominant means of production in the post-industrial American economy.

Literacy, of course, is a slippery and flexible term. Most obviously it refers to a basic ability to read and write. It also commonly refers to specialized knowledge that certain people have access to; a football fan can be said to have football literacy, for example, or someone who has cultivated a discriminating taste for wine can be said to have wine literacy. This sense of literacy as a special taste or authority can also apply to literature: a "literary literacy" might refer not just to basic reading and writing skills but an advanced breadth of knowledge (historical perspective, critical ability, etc) as a reader of poetry, fiction, and drama. Referring to someone as "literate" can mean that she has rudimentary reading and writing skills, but often it means more specifically that she has literary literacy, a strong aptitude as a reader of literature and a deep understanding of the literary field.

Literary literacy has long had social value, at least since Matthew Arnold argued that the best literature could be a means for social progress and advancing civilization. Janice Radway demonstrates in *A Feeling for Books* how the Book-of-the-Month Club enjoyed enormous success largely because of the desire of the early-to-mid twentieth century American middle class “to present themselves as educated, sophisticated, and aesthetically articulate” (5). So members of the Book-of-the-Month Club were accessing through the marketplace a kind of informal training in literary literacy, “a kind of social pedagogy for a growing class fraction of professionals, managers, and information and culture workers as well as for those who aspired to the status of this class, to its work routines, and to its privileges” (15). This way of assigning value to literary literacy marks a shift from the

essentially Arnoldian cultural project designed to seek out and foster the idiosyncratic and the unique. Although not yet named as such, the middlebrow thus appeared in the form of the Book-of-the-Month Club as a way to think the contradiction between an older model of subjectivity and production and new cultural forces that both enabled and necessitated the construction of a subject capable of operating efficiently as a cultural relay or switching station, as one merely passing on or handing off eternally circulating goods and representations, which is to say, cultural capital. (183).

Literary reading offered cultural capital, then, to a new class seeking social legitimacy, and that legitimacy, Radway suggests, not only manifested in the ability to access the elevated art object but also in the ability to access and manage a wide range of cultural materials. This shift leads to anxiety about the loss of a pure space for appreciation of literary merit, and to a series of cultural battles between the defenders and detractors of middlebrow forms.

In *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, John Guillory examines a more recent cultural battle—the canon debates of the 80s and 90s, the clash between champions

of the traditional Western canon and champions of multiculturalism—arguing that this battle is actually a symptom of a larger crisis in literary value, a shift in cultural capital away from literary reading in general. As Guillory says, "the category of 'literature' names the cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie, a form of capital increasingly marginal to the social function of the present education system" (x). If literary literacy no longer offers as much social currency to the middle class, I propose that creative literacy is claiming much of that lost cultural capital.

While literary literacy derives from the reading and studying of literature, the reception and consumption of the canon, creative literacy derives primarily from production, from practicing skills for making not only literary texts but also a wide range of cultural texts. This emphasis on production, on using literacy as a means of making, I argue, is a central feature of a newly dominant cultural capital at the beginning of the twenty-first century. While the "old bourgeoisie" could use literary consumption as a primary tool for self-construction, for making leisure time meaningful, for achieving social status, the new middle class often addresses these same desires by actively creating new texts and cultural forms. The new middle class claims authority not so much by reading and appreciating the great authors, but by *being* an author.

The democratization of authorship is not new, of course: the spread of basic literacy to a broad swath of the American population since the nineteenth-century has given ordinary individuals the ability to become authors of diaries, letters, and other kinds of informal texts. And what I would call advanced basic literacy—the kind developed in traditional academic expository writing—has become pervasive in American society at least since the post-World War II boom in higher education. The conventional first-year writing or Composition course at a university or college gives students not just basic skills in grammar and mechanics but encourages them to assert their authorial intelligence about a wide range of topics through various disciplinary lenses. These students are trained to write a conventional academic essay that poses a thesis statement or central idea about a particular subject matter, then develops that main point with concrete

evidence and specific critical thinking, usually with a logical, hierarchical sense of organization and transitions.

The Composition field has never been static or monolithic, and in recent decades the rise of an expressionistic approach to academic writing, in particular, has given students access to a more personal, narrative-based mode of authorship, moving away from a drier, more disinterested mode. Nonetheless, Composition courses still primarily teach students the fundamental communication strategies and structures of that conventional academic essay. This kind of advanced basic literacy has provided college graduates with the ability to navigate the mostly rote writing tasks of white collar, professional-managerial work, but it has also given them a certain kind of authorial experience, a claim to some unique critical thinking and an ability to assert this thinking within a vast marketplace of ideas and opinions, an ability to participate in democratic life as an educated and socially-mobile citizen.

Guillory positions Composition as the educational site where the new middle class of the late twentieth century acquired its literacy:

it is the speech of the professional-managerial classes, the administrators and bureaucrats; and it is employed in its place, the “office.” It is not “everyday” language. The point of greatest historical interest about this speech is that its production bypasses the older literary syllabus altogether. Students need no longer immerse themselves in that body of literature in order to acquire “literary” language. In taking over the social function of producing a distinction between a basic and more elite language, composition takes on as well the ideological identity of that sociolect, its pretension to universality, its status as the medium of political discourse. (79-80)

Now in the twenty-first century, I propose, the new “elite language” with its “pretension to universality” is accessed through creative literacy. Despite some overlap with advanced basic

literacy, creative literacy sets itself apart from conventional academic prose and its ways of communicating, thinking, and seeing. If Composition generally teaches students to “think inside the box” of blocky organization and linear argument, creative literacy proposes to “think outside the box,” in affective and associative ways. Creative literacy is more attuned to contemporary network thinking, globalization’s manipulations of time and space, instantaneous connecting, and the digital production of information and performance. As an important site for training in creative literacy, Creative Writing has boomed in recent decades and is fast becoming a new service course in higher education—if not eventually replacing Composition, then standing alongside it, not as a mere extracurricular activity, but as another fundamental skill-set with practical value and legitimacy.

What Do Students Do with Creative Literacy?

Although it’s often said that students can’t be taught how to write poetry and fiction, obviously the explicit goal of a Creative Writing course is to help students learn to become more skilled as writers in those literary genres. When I took these courses myself, I certainly learned poetry writing skills, if not directly from the teachings of my teachers, then from the weekly out-of-class practice I went through to produce the poems that I distributed to workshops. It turns out that I did want to become a poet, I did eventually desire publication and literary prestige, and of course many other students have similar aspirations. So creative literacy can be used to produce literary works, and often Creative Writing courses are considered effective if those works have strong literary merit, or if the students who pass through those courses go on to write works that are published by reputable magazines and presses.

The problem is, however, that only a tiny fraction of Creative Writing students will actually go on to publish their writing, and many of those who do publish will be judged to be

bad or mediocre. Commentators often frame this situation as a failing of Creative Writing—the field is generating an excess of writers who don't have the skill to make great literature. But this failure narrative ignores the possibility that many of these students, especially at the undergraduate level, never really aspire to make great works of literature. These students may be less interested in becoming career poetry or fiction writers than in accessing an amorphous experience of creativity, accessing creative literacy skills that could be applied to a broad range of practices and forms.

What I'm saying here may simply mean that Creative Writing is much like most other academic fields, particularly those in the humanities: students who receive training in these fields often don't pursue a career in them. Most students who take courses in Anthropology don't become anthropologists, most History majors don't become historians, and so on. It's understood that these fields are not failing simply because their students are not all following a successful professional path in that field; instead, students gain a general overview of the field's theories and methods as part of a broader education in a variety of fields. Students in the humanities are not expected to become specialists but to gain generic skills often lumped together as “critical thinking”—the ability to question assumptions, to see a range of choices or perspectives about a given intellectual issue, to generate logical and efficient strategies for solving complex problems. As one of the primary desired learning outcomes for Composition courses, critical thinking is a primary component of advanced basic literacy.

Creative Writing's analog to critical thinking might be called “creative thinking,” which could be considered a central component of creative literacy. While critical thinking privileges objectivity and reason, clearly articulated evidence and explanation, original interpretation and evaluation, sound solutions and conclusions, creative thinking privileges subjectivity and affect, storytelling and sensory data, ambiguity and contradiction, associative leaps and disruptions of conventional logic, doubt and uncertainty. Creative thinking uses the strange and the unknown as

productive forces rather than trying to overcome them. If it's true that Creative Writing's cultural capital has risen significantly in recent years, I argue that the rise is not due to the high social value of literary works themselves but to the increasing value of the means that produce them, that is, creative literacy and creative thinking. The new middle class subject is not so attached to traditional artistic genres, but she does have great desire to engage in a creative practice.

Students can access creative literacy/thinking most directly by taking Creative Writing or other Fine Arts courses in painting, sculpture, photography, dance, performance, and so on. But creative training can also be found in more traditional fields oriented toward the critical, depending on course content and the teacher's approach toward that content. Interdisciplinarity, the current catch-all buzzword of the academy, has enormous cultural capital because it suggests a kind of "thinking outside the box" of rigidly defined disciplines; in other words, interdisciplinarity is often code for moving the critical toward the creative, or merging the two modes together. Interdisciplinarity embraces the notion that students *not* be attached to a rigidly defined discipline as a career path, recognizing that the new globalized, digitalized knowledge economy rewards those workers who can be flexible and imagine constantly new kinds of relationships.

This issue of interdisciplinarity becomes murkier if we consider that creative fields actually have their own dominant critical modes. Creative Writing's critical mode has tended to be a New Critical style of evaluative close-reading, and I've argued that this mode could benefit from collaborations with Literary Studies and Composition, which have both developed provocative new critical methods in recent decades. Creative Writing's cultural capital derives not from its critical mode, I suggest, but from its practice of creative literacy/thinking, and its cultural capital could increase even more if it took more interdisciplinary approaches to the critical. Such interdisciplinarity might encourage the field to consider, for example, why it

appears to have so much cultural capital, what its real value as an academic field is (as I'm trying to consider here).

What do students do with creative literacy, if not forge a career as a poetry or fiction writer, or become a teacher of Creative Writing using their publication credentials? Just as the Anthropology or History student can use that Liberal Arts education as part of her training to become, for example, a social worker or a lawyer, so too there are a number of ancillary vocations associated with the Creative Writing field, including journalism, publishing, editing, arts administration, and so on. But as I've suggested, creative literacy has much broader application for a range of vocations throughout the new knowledge economy. The ability to manipulate language, to produce powerful story, image, and affect for audiences, is increasingly valued in marketing and advertising, product development and design, information technology and internet services, along with many other post-industrial fields driven by a creative ethos.

This "Creative Economy," as Richard Florida calls it, produces not only creative commodities, but also a widespread aspiration to access creative experience. Florida estimates that nearly a third of the American workforce is now part of the "Creative Class," and even more impressive, this class produces "nearly half of all wage and salary income" (xiv). These estimations still exclude an enormous number of workers, but what Florida suggests throughout his book is that the Creative Class has become the social status that many of the excluded aspire to. Pointing to evidence that such aspirational movement has been occurring on a global scale, Florida paraphrases University of Michigan's Ronald Inglehart's findings in the "long-running World Values Surveys":

As nations' economies advance, the values favored by their people tend to shift along two scales. They move from "traditional" values (marked, for instance, by respect for civil and religious authority) toward more "secular-rational" (free-thinking) values, and from "survival" values (favoring

financial and social stability) to “self-expression” values favoring the rights of individuals to express themselves. (xxv)

Given its very high economic rank, the U.S. has apparently not progressed as much in this shift as some European countries, particularly toward the “secular-rational” value, and Florida likes to scold the U.S. for not devoting enough resources to developing its Creative Economy to accelerate this shift. Nonetheless, it’s noteworthy that the “self-expression” value in the U.S. is closer to being commensurate with its economic rank, and Florida’s larger point is that the Creative Economy is indeed booming in this country.

So creativity, particularly as it manifests in modes of “self-expression,” has rapidly growing social currency. This suggests that Americans who are not among the elite creative producers recognize that “thinking outside the box” has become a powerful aptitude and they assign strong value to it, seeking out creative experiences and engaging in creative practice outside the workplace, during their leisure time. In fact, much of what the creative economy produces might be called *tools for leisure time*—techniques and technologies that allow consumers to enhance the pleasure, intensity, and meaning of their leisure time. These tools require creativity to be produced, and in turn, they help users to engage in their own creative practice.

Playful Work and the Desire of the Creative Subject

Another way to frame the current socioeconomic situation is to say that the borders between work time and leisure time are becoming increasingly permeable. Paolo Virno addresses this shift in *The Grammar of the Multitude*, and I’d like to offer two longer passages from Sylvère Lotringer’s foreword to that volume as a gloss on those ideas:

In the post-Fordist economy, surplus value is no longer extracted from labor materialized in a product, it resides in the discrepancy between paid and unpaid

work—the idle time of the mind that keeps enriching, unacknowledged, the fruits of immaterial labor. As Marx wrote in *Grundrisse*, labor activity moves “to the side of the production instead of being its chief actor.” The multitude is a force defined less by what it actually produces than by its virtuality, its *potential* to produce *and* produce itself. (12)

The multitude is the name used by some recent Marxists for the new dominant class of subjects, and as Virno (via Lotringer) asserts, the multitude thrives in the blurring of work and play, public and private activity.

Workers used to work in servile conditions, leaving them just enough time to replenish. Now their entire life is live labor, an invisible and indivisible commodity. Today all the multitude does is monitor signs on a screen. But machines are not “dead labor” anymore, they are part of the workers’ “life labor” which now plugs into the “general intellect,” disseminating knowledge across the entire public sphere. The more creative and adaptable the workers are—the more *self-valorizing*—the more surplus of knowledge they can bring to the community at large. (12-13)

Let’s be clear that, of course, many workers in the U.S. and other economically developed countries do indeed work in “servile conditions,” but the point here is that, for an increasing number of workers (who form a class that traditional servile workers often aspire to), work presents itself as liberation from servility—not as a monotonous production of material products but as the creative, performative production of signs, knowledge, and the self.

Returning now to the changing terrain of cultural capital in the academy, I suggest that among the fields that show increasing student demand are those that explore the confluences of work and play. Creative Writing promises to transform traditional academic work and infuse it with pleasure, fun, and performance, and while many accuse the field of being popular simply

because it's easy, academic "lite," a watered-down version of rigorous intellectual inquiry, it may be more accurate to say that Creative Writing's playful work is more relevant socially and economically to the new subject of the twenty-first century. And if traditional categories of work are changing, both for students and for paid workers, then it's worth examining this unlikely relevance outside of those categories.

Outside of the school and the workplace, creative literacy functions as an increasingly powerful vehicle for subject formation, for accessing social authority and status, for entering into or rising within a new middle class. Creative literacy has many of the same attractions that Janice Radway associates with middlebrow culture of the mid-twentieth century. For her, the Book-of-the-Month Club was "an exercise in social training and pedagogy" (262). It sold subscribers a kind of informal, extracurricular, extraliterary education, teaching them

how to order the modern universe and how to parse its various domains. It managed this, however, because it first hailed them as subjects with pressing emotional needs and desires produced by their particular historical situation. Equally importantly, the club instructed its subscribers in the proper stance to assume with respect to the world, and it taught them ways of feeling appropriate to that stance. It modeled a distinctive middlebrow style. (263)

Courses in Creative Writing offer this same kind of middlebrow social training, modeling for students various affective states—how to present themselves with certain measures of irony or sincerity, humor or seriousness, friendly intimacy or distant estrangement, and so on. Social training involves developing a kind of audience awareness, an ability to read an audience so as to engage them, to make them listen, to make them trust you, respect you, or like you, and creative literacy offers precisely this ability to navigate audience relations.

The milieu of the Book-of-the-Month Club was oriented more toward cultural consumption, and that audience awareness involved being able to present oneself as a savvy and

up-to-date reader in one's social life. As Radway puts it, "The club promised such a membership the chance to keep up with the ever-advancing production of new knowledge as well as the opportunity to confirm its identity as educated and au courant" (276). What Creative Writing promises is not just how to be a knowledge consumer but how to become a knowledge producer.

I should not overstate this distinction between producer and consumer, for these categories can blur in profound ways. As Michel de Certeau argues in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, consumerism can be an active, creative, unpredictable process.

To a rationalized, expansionist, and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds another production, called "consumption." The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order. (xiii)

Among the most prominent of the consumer practices Certeau examines is reading, and for him, the reader is not a passive voyeur but a kind of co-writer who brings to "another person's text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes himself in it like the internal rumblings of one's own body. Ruse, metaphor, arrangement, this production is also 'invention' of the memory. Words become the outlet or product of silent histories" (xxi). Certeau goes on to assert that this reading/poaching practice is actually an "art," the kind of art that invades an existing text or tradition and creates something new, as a renter inhabits someone else's property in a unique and inventive way. This creative reading practice has increasingly powerful implications in our current historical moment, when texts of all kinds proliferate at a dizzying rate, particularly texts that do not take traditional form, on pages bound together as books. While the text used to have a more discreet social function or place (e.g. religious, educational), says Certeau, today it is a "whole society made into a book" (xxii).

Creative literacy is perhaps not so much a shift from consumption to production, then, as the full realization of *consumption-as-production*, and the creative subject has increasing opportunity to be active and generative. If the mid-twentieth century subject asserted some creative agency in the way she read certain books, watched certain movies, and wore certain clothes, today ordinary middle-class people have access to a wider range of techniques and technologies to more actively produce a social identity—by making a home musical recording through digital technology, by making a weird video and posting it on YouTube (encouraged by its slogan, “Broadcast Yourself”), by creating a personal page on Facebook and publicizing mundane, intimate, and “random” information about your life.

As Lotringer and Virno suggest, many of these new modes of self-production occupy a virtual, immaterial space. The new creative subject is less interested in making permanent objects of art or literature but celebrates the performative, the ephemeral, the spontaneous, the simulated, and the absent. Self-production is an ongoing performance that becomes a kind of self-marketing, self-advertising. If the dominant subjective style of the mid-twentieth century is the cultural consumer, and if subjectivity now orients more toward cultural production, what are we producing? More than ever before, we can use new techniques and technologies to produce ourselves as commodities. No longer only accessorizing ourselves with commodities, we *are* the commodities, and we market ourselves to our millions of Facebook “friends.”

I don’t mean to sound cynical, though. Among the charms of Radway’s treatment of middlebrow culture is her calculated ambivalence toward it. She acknowledges that the Book-of-the-Month Club “uses sophisticated marketing techniques to sell not only individual books but the very idea of taste itself,” and yet she says,

I have found myself unable to condemn the organization in any simple way for commodifying what I was taught in graduate school should never have been commodified by the market in the first place, that is, literature, art, and

culture. Instead, in attempting to reconstruct the motives and intentions driving not only the club's founders but its subsequent judges, editors, *and* subscribers, I have continually encountered not merely the insistent desire to rise socially through any means available but also deep-seated longings for the possibilities of self-articulation and the search for transcendence promised by education and art. (5)

It turns out that the anxieties and desires surrounding the Book-of-the-Month Club are strikingly similar to those surrounding Creative Writing. Both institutions promise expanded access to literary experience, and both are accused of transforming literary experience into a mere commodity, stripping it of its authenticity and meaning. If we suspend the legitimate impulse to critique these powerful institutions, we can see ordinary people using those institutional tools to fashion some sense of autonomy and meaning in their lives. The young man who posts a quirky description of his morning routine on his Facebook page may not be able to claim status as an elite author, nor can the young woman who submits a "bad" poem to her Creative Writing workshop—nonetheless, both of these middle-class figures are accessing an authorial experience that has real effects. Particularly in the midst of our current textual saturation—when information, knowledge, stories, and images are penetrating our eyes and brains at every turn, when even the idle time spent pumping your gasoline can be infiltrated by a screen full of sensory stimulation and happy bargains—it can feel particularly powerful to assert a gesture of authorship, and whatever text one makes, no matter how insignificant or trite, that gesture can feel like a moment of freedom, a feeling of control and ownership over one's life and body.

This deep and widespread middle-class desire to be creative and to claim some creative literacy has increased the cultural capital of Creative Writing. I suggest, much more than the specific desire to become a writer of poetry or fiction. Literary literacy may be losing cultural capital, but Creative Writing thrives because it promises (implicitly or not) to satisfy a more

generalized aspiration among ordinary people to engage in a creative practice. This aspiration drives and is driven by the post-industrial economy, and as creativity becomes more pervasive as both a means of production and commodity for consumption, the boundaries between work and play break down.

Interlude 2.0

A Genealogy of My Desire as a Creative Writing Student, or How to Receive College Credit for Playing, or My Social Position in Relation to this Dissertation

Why this happiness about writing creatively, why this desire for freedom, freedom from rational logic-bound academic writing, why when I'm twenty years old, my last year as an undergraduate student, why after twenty years of thinking about words and how they go together, which makes me no different than anyone else,

but when I'm a kid there's something about language I think I understand because in school my best grades have been in English, and I learned from a young age that I am what I'm good at in school, my teachers tell me I'm good at using words, sentences, paragraphs, and I begin to see myself not so much as a writer but as my English classes, I'm that institutional space where we learn how to use English (as Americans use it), where writing is supposed to take place, although mostly it's grammar and vocabulary exercises, but still it's where I'm called *excellent*, and therefore it's what I most identify with, what's most me,

certainly I'm not math, not science, nor am I gym class because I know my body is not fast or strong or anything, in fact my body barely exists, although at recess, when I'm just playing in the

playground, there my body does feel alive and present, that's the bodily pleasure of school for me, and yet it's a pleasure that simulates a temporary departure from school (without leaving school grounds), so recess is always tinged with the imminent disappointment of its whistle-blown end, so mostly I think of play happening outside of school,

mostly I play with my brother and the neighborhood kids, that somewhat arbitrary network of kids I call my friends, I mean they are my friends simply because they live near me and they like to play too, and this kind of playing is always better when it can be shared, it's communal, so when you want to play you walk over to your neighbor's house and ask him if he wants to play, that's often how it begins, a gesture of sharing, collaboration, and maybe other kids see you outside playing and they put on their sneakers and join you, soon you've got a yard full of players generating imagination, many imaginations composing and recomposing into a group,

but now let's not romanticize too much, because this play can become ugly, selfish, combative, competitive, cruel, sometimes power in the group is no longer shared but acquired, coveted, used as a weapon, there is shoving, pinching, hair-pulling, fist-fighting, someone gets hurt, there are nasty words, there are tantrums, there are tears, but usually play works out okay, it's usually peaceful, we learn that cooperation makes play last longer,

we also learn that make-believe makes play better, it's a collaboration that benefits from performance, almost always we act, and it turns out that acting is often enhanced by interacting with others, even when alone we might make up imaginary friends (collaborators), in which case we ourselves might become something else, we disguise our voices or take on a role or call our hand a monster or call a twig a pirate, sometimes this playing requires no equipment but often it's enhanced by equipment, usually known as toys, stuffed animals, dolls, balls, water-guns, yo-yos,

all these toys help take us creatively away from what would otherwise be unbearably dull, they help us make believe, pretend,

you be X and I'll be Y and this is our house our castle our island our store our war our mountain our spaceship our anything, because this is our story and we're characters in our story as we say it, because it is very very fun to not be adults, to not be rational, factual, realistic, solid, sober, because it is very fun to spin around in circles in the yard with arms extended like propellers, the neighbors' houses flying around and around until your head feels wobbly and you stumble, you lose control,

then by 7th grade for me this playing begins to transform into watching TV, this is not shared communal playing but it gives the appearance of social relations, it also gives the appearance of being imaginative but that imagination is pretty much provided on the screen, it's determined by the screen and the speed movement content, so this TV play is more passive or receptive, solitary, and this makes it an easier, more predictable image of being in community, and this ease can be so delicious, this knowing how good it will feel to be subsumed by The Brady Bunch or Happy Days for a full 30 minutes including commercials,

and then I learn to masturbate, and I begin to interrupt my TV watching with trips to the upstairs bathroom to masturbate, and for years I do this as much as possible, sometimes several times per day, sometimes I make it a little weirder/wilder, I perform a sex scene with myself, I take Polaroids, but usually I'm just going for the orgasm, I'm an orgasm addict (as the Buzzcocks put it), somehow I accumulate a small collection of soft pornography magazines to help facilitate the production of my erections—a Playboy, a Hustler, maybe a Swank—these are like toys that help enhance the playing, but eventually the process takes on a sameness, it becomes standardized, it's

just an ejaculation delivery-system, and don't get me wrong, that orgasm feels good, but afterwards, holding my dis-engorging penis, I usually feel some loss of satisfaction, an emptiness tinged with guilt,

and then beginning in 11th grade there's less masturbation because I start having sex with other people, suddenly I become a boyfriend, suddenly I have a girlfriend, we have sex as often as possible, we have enormous pleasures, and although the orgasm is important, very very important that my body go into little convulsions and release some creamy lumpy substance, it's particularly pleasurable when getting to the orgasm is more creative, performative, when you do things with your bodies that might be taboo, flirting with a prohibited zone while learning how to read your partner like a text that says it's okay, let's go to this daring place together, or wait, I'm scared, let's not go there yet, it's a new kind of communicating that often doesn't occur in actual words, and sometimes that communication feels like love or almost love, or being (almost) loved by someone else, being in communication with one who wants you, and it feels like being more present, like your body glows with wanting and being wanted,

but at the same time, during high school, there's another kind of play that involves distorting and disorienting the body, throwing the body out of balance, I'm talking about ingesting alcohol, beer and liquor are new toys that help enhance a new kind of adolescent playing, just like when we were kids we wanted to send ourselves on a pretend journey or make our heads wobbly, now I alter my driver's license with a ballpoint pen, now I alter my identity so that I can purchase a lot of Rolling Rocks, now my friends and I can go park in some dark cul-de-sac and listen to *The Talking Heads Springsteen Psychedelic Furs The Police* and suck down many sweet tangy beers that turn my whole circulatory system into a warm sweet secret tangy smile,

and then I go to the University of Virginia, because I have been expected to earn at least a four-year undergraduate degree since I was born, both my parents went to college and we are very white middle-class suburban, whether or not I go to college is never an issue for debate in my family, and I want to go, going to college is how people like me leave home, escape from home and never return, because escaping is a privilege, a sign of privilege for everyone to see, staying home after high school graduation would be a sign of defeat, low ambition, poverty, a bad sign,

so I go proudly off to the University of Virginia, and yes I have escaped from the confines of home and direct parental rule, but I'm still in the confines of an institution, I'm still in school, so I still need some escape from work into a world of play, and I'm in luck because although UVA is known to be academically demanding it's also known as a party school, work hard play hard is the student motto, and the next kind of play I find involves more altering of consciousness, it involves what we call illicit drugs, and every weekend is devoted to druggy oblivion, that good sweet expansive oblivion whose foundation is still alcoholic beverages but with an additional layer of marijuana, and sometimes a few grams of mushrooms, or a tab of acid, or maybe go in on an 8-ball of cocaine with a bunch of people because our parents just sent the monthly allowance check,

or best of all, get a half dozen friends and everyone take some ecstasy, because ecstasy is a new kind of drug whose name refers not to itself as a substance but to the state it induces, the state of extreme happiness, huge giddy affection for yourself and everyone else, I remember my friend Ben taking X for the first time, he was walking down the sidewalk roaring like a lion, then leaping down the sidewalk arms outstretched trying to grab the roars as they exited his mouth and floated through the air, Ben is usually a quiet reserved adult-like person so this roaring leaping is magical and a thrill to witness, because we see him playing performing like a child, we take these

drugs to feel the druggy pleasure of chemicals rushing through the brain which gives us permission to feel like children playing, and we are playing together happily, ecstatically,

but now let's not romanticize too much, because there's usually a point in the druggy night when things get desperate stupid lost empty, when everyone is coming down, breaking down, drifting away, throwing up, feeling pain, wondering why we did this to ourselves, but this regret and alienation only lasts for a while, and soon it will be next weekend and we'll do it all again, we'll come together and make our heads wobbly again,

then there's another kind of playing I discover during my college years, I play post-punk rock music, I learn to play drums, I listen to post-punk music most of the time, I listen to *Sonic Youth Wire The Replacements Scratch Acid Big Black Throwing Muses Butthole Surfers*, this music saturates my days/nights, it subsumes me, and I play my favorite songs on the air as a disc jockey for the university's alternative radio station WTJU, I have this great desire to share this music with other people, this music slices through the safe suburban sameness that has been my life for so many years, and for me the music's meaning is augmented by sharing it, giving it to others and letting others give music to me,

and I think about all my favorite band names and how amazing it is to put the word *Butthole* next to the word *Surfers*, because those words are not supposed to go together, but that unexpectedness, being not what you expect to hear in my safe suburban sameness, and putting them together makes new things happen, in fact it makes an amazing explosion of meanings that's funny scary strange smart and makes me feel like I can find a home that's not suburban, not the same gridwork of straight lines and secret feelings you're not allowed to feel or say,

and when I play drums with my band—our name is *Empty Box*, which is not really one of the good band names, but we were trying—it sometimes feels like something important happens, like we could make music that other people would hear and like, although being liked in the world of post-punk music means that you have cultivated a certain unlikeability, I mean it's music that tries to be ugly abrasive uneasy difficult, it knows that our mothers should not like it, and our grandmothers should be horrified by it unless they're good at pretending it doesn't exist, so playing this music is at least partly about playing with the values I'm given, about manipulating and doing some damage to the values I've been absorbing,

it's also about producing something that might be art, we have consciously positioned ourselves as artists who are collectively known as *Empty Box*, and we make songs that we practice, we record them (at first on a boombox) as if to preserve them, and we're beginning to conceive of an audience, the kind of audience that we are when we go to the 9:30 Club in Washington DC to see other post-punk bands, we want to join that community of people who know themselves as makers of this brand of musical art,

but now I'm back in school, twenty years old, in a Creative Writing class for the first time ever, and I think all these years of playing has delivered me to this moment, because I certainly know that none of these kinds of playing can be evaluated by the educational system as a productive skill, playing is supposed to be the opposite of scholastic productivity, playing is the opposite of work, because hide-and-seek, watching TV, masturbation, sexual intercourse, ingesting alcohol and drugs, making rock music, none of these are allowed to be integrated into the academic curriculum, these activities cannot be taught and evaluated by the school, although I think I would've gotten very good grades in those subjects, I learned from a young age that what really gives pleasure happens outside of school,

nonetheless there is something about writing that I seem to have somewhat enjoyed, and my writing at this point has happened mostly in school, there is the pleasure of making something, it feels like I've become a little larger, I've added to the world, proliferated, I've become more present, the words are on the page but they're also partly me, those words also communicate to other people, even if only the teacher, they are a little attempt to be in community, with other people and with other words, ideas, things, windows, clouds, boredom...

but mostly I've written reports and essays and obligatory letters that begin, "How are you? I'm fine," and on occasion I've written a little story about men made of lava who live underground, or a little poem about my favorite football team, the Washington Redskins, (a poem that begins, "One o'clock Sunday, a miserable day/ It's pouring down rain at RFK"),

and in my highschool lost in the suburbs of our nation's capital, near the Tysons Corner shopping mall, I did write for the George C. Marshall highschool newspaper, *The Rank & File*, it was a choice I made willingly because I wanted to put words together and then put them in the world, into circulation, put myself into circulation, so I wrote obligatory articles about the golf team, the dangers of drinking and driving, recent attempts to increase school spirit (e.g. that year's official non-ironic school slogan: "Marshall High: The School Without a Town!")

so by the time I'm twenty years old I've pretty much never called my writing "creative," and to be sitting now in a class that gives writing permission to be "creative" makes me happy, it's not the happiness associated with the possibility of becoming a famous writer, although that desire does have some vague presence, nor is it the happiness of participating in a grand tradition of canonized poetry, in fact as a twenty year old I know almost nothing about a poetry tradition,

no, it's the happiness of playing, except that this playing is different because it's happening in school, somehow the educational system has found a place for play, it has transformed play into something that can be called academic work, or maybe it has made a kind of academic work that's also play, in any case it's an amazing feeling because it seems like maybe an opportunity to continue being a child within an institution devoted to producing adults, or more importantly, to receive institutional legitimacy for being playful,

this is the promise of Creative Writing for me at twenty, and I'm guessing that many students come to this academic field with variations on this promise, and on that first day of Introduction to Poetry Writing, the teacher tells us to write a poem by next week, bring copies of the poem for everyone in the class, then he will choose one of our poems for us to discuss first, then the student chosen first will choose another student's poem to discuss second, and so on down the line until we finish discussing all the poems, and each week we'll do the same thing, bring in our poems and talk about them,

and when that day arrives, that day when we are going to "workshop" our poems for the first time, we're all a little nervous of course because we want other people to like our poems, we spent all week making these beautiful little things made of words, and we don't want them to be rejected, so we feel some anxious anticipation, we wonder who is going to be chosen first by our teacher, what will it mean to be chosen first, will that be good or bad,

then we all settle into that circle, and the teacher says the first poem we're going to workshop is called "Jesus Smells Like Dirt," and suddenly my whole body flushes with hot light, my brain swells, because that's the name of MY poem, I think this must mean that my poem is good, and

this affirmation feels good, but then for a second I wonder if maybe he wants to begin with the bad, maybe my poem will be an example of what not to do as a poet, so I read it aloud nervously, then the teacher begins talking about my poem, basically the first poem I've ever written (besides the Redskins poem), and what I hear him saying is that my poem is good good good, he likes it because I put words together in unexpected ways, he points out a phrase he likes, "coughing radiator Sunday," he likes how those words make new meanings by playing with the old meanings, then other students in the class join in the discussion, and I hear them agreeing with the teacher, they're also saying the poem is good good good, and this makes me feel very good,

so I leave that classroom feeling a kind of buoyant bliss that I've never felt before, like I've been affirmed in some fundamental way, like I'm a winner not a loser, like I have the power to keep winning because I can write more poems that will be called good, because my poems will be better than poems of other students, because those other students are chosen after me, and the teacher talks more about how those other poems can be improved, but mine is good the way it is, I'm good the way I am, I'm walking across campus feeling like I have access to a secret special pleasure,

but this pleasure is not really the pleasure of writing itself, instead it's a pleasure determined by the structure of that class, the pleasure of receiving more approval than other students, the pleasure of my self-esteem jacked up by praise, I'm already standing confidently on the top rung of the class hierarchy, of course it doesn't occur to me that such a hierarchy isn't natural or inevitable, that our teacher might have set up a different structure for the class that wouldn't position students in competition with one another, that wouldn't make evaluation the primary activity of every class, and of course it doesn't occur to me what it feels like to be on the bottom rung of the hierarchy, to have been the last student whose poem was chosen, to have written the

poems that were not praised or were praised only in that muted, obligatory, equivocal, forced way—"well, this image of the hummingbird is really interesting, but I wonder if you need to keep looking for fresher language to talk about your grandmother's death..."

I mean, what does it mean to have your poem judged like this in a group context, it's not like we're being evaluated anonymously with letter grades as we are in most other classes, in fact my poems never receive letter grades, and this absence of the familiar academic evaluation apparatus might appear to be a liberation, a democratizing gesture, but maybe the workshop doesn't do away with evaluation so much as foreground it, bring it out into the open, make it what the class does, which means (for one thing) that the teacher might have less work to do outside of class, so the workshop can liberate the teacher from some labor, and maybe those bottom rung students would still feel crushed if they received a bad letter grade on their poem, and after class those lesser students might walk across campus feeling depressed and dejected, but perhaps the group critique magnifies the consequences of evaluation, because your poem's aesthetic value is being judged in this more complex, tenuous social network made up of various personalities with uncertain authority trying to acquire authority, authorship as well as critical authority, and usually everyone wants to be liked, particularly by the teacher, maybe one student flirts with another student, maybe one student finds another student repulsive, maybe one finds another super charming but lacking talent, or super talented but lacking charm, one writes particularly with another student in mind, in any case it can be a mess of social relations, which is true of any class of course, but when you throw this mess into the mess of a group critique, the mess can be magnified,

and this first time I feel like the winner, and that winning feeling is magnificent, and I know that I will go back to the room I rent in the basement of a house and start thinking about another poem,

this week I'll orient myself my life my relationships toward that poem, I'll accommodate that poem, nurture and respect it, this process of writing will be magical, I'll put words together in unexpected ways, and I'll be very happy not to be writing an academic essay or reading a textbook or studying for a mid-term exam, this play of poetry allows me to be wrong, in fact it's right to be wrong, to make words perform the wrong role, and that wrongness will be the new rightness of homework, homework that I desire, I have sex with my homework, I make music with my homework, my homework helps me to live, my homework lives in my body and always in the back of my mind, there it is, as I walk around, ride the bus, stare out the window, at the TV, everything becomes maybe material for my poems, any sensory data might become language, seeing becomes a conscious activity, I see myself seeing, I listen to how people speak, how they put words together, and I listen to myself listening,

all of this life and writing happens outside the classroom, but the fact that I've been assigned to write a poem every week in a Creative Writing course, that fact has made all of this happen, I'm building my life around the weekly due date, and when I finish typing the poem, I go to the copy machine and make copies, I bring the copies to class as if they were beautiful strange baby animals, I give everyone in the class my strange animal and hope they look upon it with wonder and admiration, I want them to like it, I want my teacher to like it especially, because his affirmation grants me access to the empire of legitimate play,

toward the end of that semester, my teacher and I begin meeting outside of class, he invites me to get coffee with him—although I'm so young and unsophisticated I'm not even a coffee drinker yet—and we talk about poetry, and I consume every word he says, he has spent much more time writing and reading than I have, and every word he says seems charged with magic, power, art, and eventually he asks me what my plans are after graduation, how will I keep writing poetry, he

tells me that my poetry is good and that I should consider applying to MFA programs, but I don't really know what this means, I vaguely know that he himself is a graduate student working on a master's degree in poetry writing, but it doesn't occur to me that such a degree is generally available at other universities around the country, now I'm really stunned, I mean earning a few undergraduate credits through Creative Writing is a blessing, but the idea of earning an entire master's degree by writing poetry seems like some kind of paradise where I can do what I love most and feel legitimate at the same time,

so only a few months after I've written my first poem, I apply to an MFA program, with the application I include about a dozen pages of poetry, pretty much all that I've written, and amazingly I'm accepted into this paradise, I don't know how this paradise can exist but I don't need to know because I've been accepted, I've been given at least a few more years of play and I don't need to ask why, why on earth would a major university offer such an impractical degree, I mean are there jobs for poets out there, what can an MFA degree be used for, how many others like me are going to these programs, how many of these programs exist, I don't know the answers to these questions, all I know is that I'm going to be an MFA student and it's a brilliant strategy for avoiding some deadening corporate or government job,

and it turns out that I enter the world of Creative Writing in the midst of a remarkable period of its growth as an academic field, which means that I'm not exceptional, many others like me are discovering this institutional paradise of play called the MFA program, we're so optimistic and hungry for more of that affirmation from fellow students and teachers, we're hoping to become superstars of the program, we're pretty much dizzy with a sense that everything's possible, pretty soon we'll be publishing our stuff and winning awards,

but now let's not romanticize too much, because there will be regret and disappointment later on, although we can't yet see it, the loss of happiness that once seemed so strong and permanent, the boredom and predictability of workshop discussions, and how all that affirmation will dissolve and leave us alone with our poems, uncertain of their aesthetic value, certain only that they don't seem to have economic value, we can't see any of that right now, because now is the time to play...

Movement 2.0

A Genealogy of the Workshop

Thinking Outside the Workshop: The Unacknowledged Legislation of Creative Literacy

If poetry and fiction as literary products have less social value than creative literacy, why would courses in writing poetry and fiction have such strong cultural capital? In other words, what is it about traditional literary genres that serve as special vehicles for accessing creative literacy? The answer, I think, involves the powerfully contradictory status these traditional literary categories possess: on one hand, poetry and fiction serve as stable carriers of aesthetic tradition and intellectual authority; on the other hand, they are often seen as flexible and provocatively unstable, able to challenge and reinvent themselves, delighting in the possibility of undermining the foundational assumptions about what poems and stories are. This special status gives literary genres both institutional credibility and the versatility to accommodate a broad range of uses. Given the long history of literature as an object of academic inquiry, courses in Creative Writing can be more easily justified than courses in writing content for social network websites; at the same time, literary genres are increasingly able to accommodate non-traditional and non-literary forms—to use unexpected models, such as an infomercial, a glossary, a news report, a personal ad, an email exchange, an instruction manual, and so on. After suggesting to my Creative Writing class recently that they can borrow forms from popular culture in their literary writing, one student immediately floated the idea of writing a poem in the form of a “Google Trends” list of most popular search-engine terms for a given day. When I responded to the idea affirmatively, I could see that his mind immediately went to work imagining possibilities

for that form, as if he'd just been given permission to enter a space he'd always wanted to explore.

When I teach courses in poetry writing, my students study and practice in traditional forms such as the sonnet or the ghazal, but I want them to understand that poetic form is not confined to a limited range of rigid categories bequeathed to us from the past. Those traditional forms can be reinvented, usually by loosening the given formal constraints or by combining them with unexpected new elements. More importantly, all poems have form whether we call those poems “free verse” or “formal verse,” whether the techniques they use have a recognized name or not. I often assign Ron Padgett’s *Handbook of Poetic Forms* because it approaches form with this kind of expansive, generous attitude. It includes discussion of well-recognized forms, such as the sestina and blank verse, alongside forms whose status is less established, forms that manifest not only textually but in the process, experience, or performance of the poem, such as “found poem” (79) or “walk poem” (200). Just as we can think about the text as not being bound to the page or the genre, we can also think about form as not being bound to the text. So part of what literary genres can do is challenge and expand their own genre boundaries, which means that students who practice Creative Writing are not just practicing poetry and fiction. They’re also practicing many non-traditional or non-literary forms, and they’re also practicing the production of many different kinds of texts. This broad experience gives them access to creative literacy—a literacy that includes but is not limited to the literary.

Despite the rise of creative literacy, despite the loosening boundaries and definitions of form, text, and genre, the Creative Writing field still often presents itself as a refuge for strictly literary appreciation. The traditional workshop method tends to treat poems and stories as contained objects to be evaluated for aesthetic merit, produced by original, individual talents. Given that literary reading rates and book sales appear to be flat or declining, the workshop method’s emphasis on the excellence of literary products might appear at first glance to be a

liberation from the marketplace and commodity culture, preserving a space for non-commercial aesthetic value for literary practitioners. Creative Writing teachers often advocate literary reading (i.e. literary literacy) as an integral part of developing skills and historical awareness as a writer, but they often bemoan how little reading experience their students have, or how unwilling students are to engage in a rigorous reading practice. Students are supposedly too self-indulgent, short-sighted, and addicted to the instant gratifications of consumer culture, to see themselves humbly working in a tradition of great literature; against this tide, teachers see themselves as needing to keep fighting for the value of aesthetic excellence.

I propose, however, that the traditional workshop doesn't transcend the marketplace but ignores how the marketplace actually operates in Creative Writing. While this academic field presents itself as preserving literary literacy, I argue that creative literacy actually functions as its unacknowledged market value and the real cause of its boom in cultural capital. I'm not interested in celebrating or condemning creative literacy and its connection to the post-industrial economy, and I certainly don't advocate that Creative Writing abandon its claim on literary literacy and embrace its role as a training ground for workers in the creative economy. Instead, what I advocate is that Creative Writing acknowledge and engage in an ongoing critical investigation of how it already does give students access to creative literacy, how it already does have ties to the post-industrial economy. To ignore these ties is to implicitly endorse them, no matter how fiercely the field defends itself as an isolated, noncommercial enterprise. Part of Creative Writing's job should be to develop a reflexive critical discourse to examine its own historical and social position on an ongoing basis. As the central pedagogical mode of this field since its emergence just before World War II, the workshop method deserves special scrutiny.

Anatomy of a Workshop

We are students taking a Creative Writing class. We are sitting around a seminar table, in a circle or a square or a rectangle or some unnamed shape that forms a whole, whose perimeter forms a continuous, unbroken series of links between participants. We brought our copies of each other's work, and we have thought about whether that work is working, and how it can be made to work even better. Because a poem or story can always work better. We are ready to talk about this work now. We are ready to spend about three hours talking, with a break in the middle.

Where did these copies come from? Well, most likely we wrote our work and printed it out and took it to a copy shop and made enough copies for everyone in the class. Then we brought it to class and handed it out, usually at the end of the class meeting, and those works will usually be "workshopped" the following week, or if there's a backlog, a cue forms and we get to them when we can. There are other ways of distributing copies in advance, and some workshops do cold readings, on the spot, which means that works can be brought in and workshopped on the same day.

Where does the work itself come from? Well, that's not something we usually talk about in the workshop. We are told by our teacher to produce work and bring it in to be workshopped, but we are not told how to produce that work. On occasion our teacher might make us all write the same kind of thing—everyone write a sonnet, or everyone write a story entirely in dialogue—but even on this rare occasion we're not told how to proceed with that task.

So now we are ready to go. Someone's work is chosen to be workshopped next, either by the teacher or another student, often the one whose work was workshopped last. Or the next work is simply the next one in the cue. Now we are ready for the writer to read the work aloud, and there's a sense of anticipation in the air, because we are about to witness a performance, and the reader may be nervous about the performance, or about being workshopped. And we are nervous

too, because we're not sure how the discussion will go, and maybe there will be a harsh critique of the work, or maybe two people will disagree fiercely. You never know what could happen.

Other than reading the work aloud, the writer does not usually speak during discussion. This is called "the gag rule." The discussion of the work should not be tainted by the writer's intentions or justifications, although sometimes the writer is granted permission to talk after everyone else has talked. Usually she just says, "thanks for the comments, that was very helpful." But maybe there will be a little more said, and sometimes if the criticism has been severe, we might hear a little resentment or hurt in her voice. But that is rare, because there's an unwritten rule in workshops that the writer should take criticism with a cool, dispassionate grace, keeping a pleasant look on her face at all times even if she feels excruciating pain on the inside.

What does the workshop say about the work? Well, we usually begin with some descriptive discussion about what we think the work tries to do, what effects it tries to create for readers, what associations it conjures up, and perhaps how it's like or unlike other works in the world. The descriptive talk usually shifts quickly into positive talk, about what the work is doing well, about how well the good parts are crafted, how some of the images are really vivid or how the speaker sounds really sincere.

But we all know what's coming. Eventually almost every workshop discussion arrives at the negative criticism. Sometimes these comments are blunt and brutal, but mostly we learn how to be nuanced and nimble in voicing our complaints. We do not want to be confrontational or hurtful, we do not want to be disliked or considered mean-spirited, so we find more muted or objective sounding language, often set up with a clause of encouragement. We say, I really like how this story tries to get away from the opening scene, but I wonder if readers will really want to follow this character into a JC Penney's. We say, the surreal images are really interesting, but how do they all fit together, and what's at stake here? It's those later clauses that always get you,

that pry open your chest cavity and fry your organs, although we don't let anyone see us in pain, we maintain a cool, dispassionate grace. For their sake and ours.

Workshop of Democracy

In the preface to their popular textbook, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French offer students a brief overview of the workshop. There is no acknowledgement that the term “workshop” could mean radically different things to different people, and of course, it's true that the word has taken on a generally accepted meaning in the Creative Writing field. As the editors say, this classroom method is “sufficiently evolved that it has given rise to a new verb—“to workshop” (xi). When we say, “the poem was workshopped,” there is now a widespread understanding that a group of people sat around a table and gave the poem an evaluative critique. It's worth noting that this verb does not refer to the activity of making a literary text or performing any part of the writing process; instead it refers entirely to a system of responding to works that have already been made, at least as a draft.

The editors do not ask why this word “workshop” has come to signify this one method and not many other possible methods that could have the same name. They make a slight concession that “workshops inevitably vary,” but what matters here is that “a basic pattern has evolved in which twelve to twenty students are led by an instructor who is also a published writer. The students take turns writing, copying, and distributing stories, which the others take away, read, and critique” (xii). This critique is then presented and performed through a special kind of class discussion—not just people talking but taking on a

commitment...to give close attention to work that is embryonic. The atmosphere of such a group is intense and personal in a way that other college classes are not, since a major text of the course is also the raw effort of its participants. At the same time, unlike the classic model of the artist's atelier or the music

conservatory, the instruction is assumed to come largely from the group rather than from a single master of technical expertise. Thus the workshop represents a democratization of both the material for college study and its teaching. (xi)

Because the Creative Writing teacher takes a seat in the circle with students, rather than looming over them at the front of the room and demanding their uniform attention, Burroway and Stuckey-French suggest, the writers' workshop shifts the balance of authority. Students are implicitly given more legitimacy as readers and critics, while the teacher implicitly gives up his claim to exclusive sovereignty over the students. Not a dictatorship, these editors say, the workshop is like a free and fair election in which all participants are given an equal vote.

Burroway and Stuckey-French qualify this viewpoint with a little cynicism: "as with all democratization, the perceived danger is that the process will flatten out the story's edge and originality, and that the result will be a homogenized 'revision by committee'" (xii). This is a common critique of the workshop form—that it encourages a kind of sameness, everyone tends toward a bland aesthetic middleground for fear of being too different. This is the ugly underbelly of democracy that Tocqueville warned against: the tyranny of the easy majority, individualism settling for the accepted, pre-packaged, safe opinions that don't require extra effort or responsibility.

Burroway and Stuckey-French don't labor over this concern as others have done, for they have set out to address average Creative Writing students and their practical concerns. Among the "pitfalls" they point out are being "buoyed into self-satisfaction by too-lavish praise or...crushed by too-harsh criticism" (xiii). They then end this prefatory note with some comments about how to manage or avoid these tendencies:

be still, be greedy for suggestions, take everything in, and don't defend.

This is difficult because the story under discussion is still new and may feel highly personal. The author has a strong impulse to explain and plead. If the

criticism is “This isn’t clear,” it’s hard not to feel “You didn’t read it right”....

There is also a self-preservation impulse to keep from changing the core of what you’ve done: “Don’t they realize how much time and effort I’ve already put in?”

(xiv).

What the editors admirably suggest here is that the workshop form can harden students into a defensive position that doesn’t allow them to grow and improve. Rather than seeking a transformative experience, the student seeks to be merely affirmed, to have legitimated the voice and style that he’s already brought to the workshop.

Again the editors don’t have time to dwell on this problem because they have a practical guidebook to present, but I’d like to consider how this problem may be encouraged by the very form of the workshop, rather than being simply an occasional unfortunate side-effect. Perhaps the apparent freedom given to students to create their literary works entirely on their own instills in them the notion that they must fill that freedom with their own individual imaginative power, that to be a superstar requires that they be completely original and self-contained. When that freedom is coupled with evaluative criticism, either positive or negative, whatever identity that writer brings to the workshop may congeal and resist change. Burroway and Stuckey-French warn against “too-lavish praise” or “too-harsh criticism,” but is it possible that any degree of evaluation in that workshop context will tend to make students cling more tightly to what they already think they are as writers?

What Would Whitman and Dickinson Do?

The editors of *Writing Fiction* voice a common complaint about the workshop—that it’s a bureaucratic exercise that drains the unique life out literary works. Often when you hear this kind of critique of the workshop form, it’s accompanied by a reference to the absurdity of some canonized writer being in a workshop and having his or her work workshopped: “Can you

imagine Whitman being in a workshop; what would the class say about *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*: ‘great images, but what’s at stake here?’” This kind of comment suggests, with smug amusement, that the workshop method cannot recognize or respond adequately to the special talent and idiosyncratic vision of literary greats. It self-consciously risks a certain elitist, anti-democratic exceptionalism for a humble reverence toward our literary masters, although the complainer implicitly claims some of that exceptional greatness by association, through the ability to see beyond the mundane world of the workshop. The mistake it makes is not to suggest that the average workshop lacks the talent and critical skill to rise to Whitman’s level of aesthetic excellence; instead, it fails to understand that the average workshop often doesn’t help average students. Much critique of the writers’ workshop is informed by this kind of smug elitism veiled by aesthetic reverence.

A fascinating and creative example of this criticism comes in a piece entitled “Emily Dickinson Attends a Writing Workshop” by Jayne Relaford Brown. Essentially it’s the full text of Dickinson’s famous poem #764 (“My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun”) presented as if in manuscript form and as if it had been “workshopped” by a fellow classmate or teacher. Over the Dickinson text are scrawled hand-written comments, including line edits and general suggestions for improvement such as “I suggest a re-ordering of stanzas—that might help clarity by creating a sense of chronology.” The comments go on to advocate reworking stanza 2 (a new, more digestible version is provided) and cutting entirely the last stanza 6. The final global comment goes like this:

Emily – Nice language here, but I end this poem feeling confused. We need to SEE the speaker’s “Master.” Who is he? Why does “He” own the speaker? Why is her life like a “loaded gun?” You seem to be alluding to some anger yet the cause is never explored or revealed to the reader. Is there another poem behind

this one that still needs to be written? I'd like to see you bring this through workshop again. (8)

The implication of this parody of workshopese is that it can never accommodate true genius or a radically unexpected literary sensibility. The prevailing advice, packaged in the form of an annoying swarm of "why" questions, is that the poem needs to be less elusive, more revealing, more attentive to the needs of readers. Of course we are supposed to dismiss this advice because poem #764 has been confirmed as an American masterpiece, and the joke's on the small-minded workshopper who's blind to the strange power of Emily's poetry. This parody further intimates that Dickinson's sensibility can only develop alone, in isolation, without the polluting influence of others, without the standardizing pressure of an institution.

I find Brown's parody convincing, illuminating, and entertaining in many ways, but it's in danger of misunderstanding the real dangers of workshoping by reducing the victims to the rare super-genius poet. It implicitly says to anyone who thinks they might be a rare super-genius poet (and who doesn't hold out some hope?): stay away from workshops! But it's important to consider that this kind of workshopese affects all Creative Writing students, and more importantly, the accepted workshop method is not natural and inevitable. Rather, it has developed under specific historical circumstances and in the context of specific institutional needs; in other words, certain forces and people have shaped the form of the writers' workshop for certain reasons, and it can be reformed for the better.

Creation Myths of the Workshop

To investigate the origins of what's called "the workshop method," it's useful to begin with an overview of Creative Writing's emergence and development in general, as narrated by D.G. Myers in *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*, the one comprehensive history of the field. In this book, using an impressive array of primary research, Myers constructs a

credible account of how Creative Writing came to be a prominent feature of American education by the first half of the twentieth century and has continued to thrive since then. Particularly fascinating is how fiercely Myers argues his perspective about these historical materials, even while claiming that he intends “neither to defend the honor of campus writers nor to heap more ridicule upon them,” and that his stance is not that of “the debater, who argues the *status quo ante* must be altered or preserved, but that of the historian” (3). Almost in the same breath, however, he claims his particular “allegiance to the old discredited liberal principle that knowledge is its own end,” announcing his dedication to “promulgating the views of creative writing’s founders...that literature is an end in itself” (4). Meyers goes on to say that his advocacy of knowledge and literature “for its own sake” actually means “for the sake of cultivation”—as if that term were transparent and ideologically neutral—as opposed to the pursuit of Creative Writing “for the purpose of gaining a livelihood or for more specialized knowledge” (7). So Myers does have a particular theoretical perspective: he champions a certain bygone incarnation of the campus writer while heaping contempt upon the model that has emerged in the late twentieth century.

This good-idea-gone-bad motif begins with a broader claim that informs the entire book: what we call Creative Writing, Myers says, does not so much refer to literary practice or products but primarily to a method of teaching, as well as a “national system for the employment” (xi) of literary writers as teachers. Meyers continually frames Creative Writing as an educational phenomenon, originating within schools and universities, and evolving primarily in response to certain institutional struggles between competing notions about how to teach language, literature, and writing. The first struggle goes back to the late nineteenth century, when English studies was beginning to emerge alongside two educational trends: increased interest in defining an American literature, and a decline in the study of classics. Within English studies, another prolonged battle develops between the philologists (those precursors to today’s linguists who advocated scholarly,

scientific research) and literary critics (who advocated appreciation and aesthetic evaluation of literature). The former group came into dominance in the decades following the Civil War while the latter group began to assert itself at the turn of the century, culminating in the 1930s rise of “New Criticism” in the wake of literary modernism. It was this shift toward criticism and literary value, argues Myers, that helped create the institutional conditions for the ascendancy of the Creative Writing field.

This ascendancy first begins to manifest more generally as an increased focus on writing instruction throughout higher education at the turn of the century. English Composition, which began at Harvard as an attempt to integrate the study and practice of literature (36), actually resembled and served “as a precedent for” what we now call Creative Writing (40), says Myers. While those early courses in Composition did not focus primarily on the production of stories and poems, they did tend to emphasize daily writing and the agency of the student-writer rather than on correctness and rigid rhetorical categories. By the 1920’s, however, pressures mounted for English Composition to focus more on meeting basic proficiency needs of an expanding student population; this shift created room for two other kinds of writing instruction to emerge: on one hand, a call for professional training led to the establishment of journalism courses, and on the other hand, there was a greater demand for what Myers calls “expression,” which gave courses in Creative Writing a stronger sense of academic purpose.

The narrative takes an interesting turn here, going outside the realm of higher education to a junior high school in New York City, where in the early 1920’s, Hughes Mearns transformed the standard English curriculum into a student-centered space for creativity and self-expression (101). A major figure in the progressive education movement and highly influenced by John Dewey’s educational philosophy, Mearns was the first to use the term “creative writing” to refer to a course of study in his widely read book, *Creative Youth* (103). In the following couple of decades, the progressive education movement came into dominance, and Creative Writing was

adopted in schools across the country, becoming “one of the most popular subjects in the curriculum” (104). “Creativism” is the name that Myers gives this progressive democratization of creativity, the belief that everyone has the capacity for artistic aptitude given the right guidance and circumstances, and it becomes apparent that he thinks “creativism” lacks a key element that would come to define Creative Writing in the academy. Says Myers: “did not a culture also depend upon undemocratic distinctions between greater and lesser creative achievements? Wasn’t *criticism*...unsparingly evaluative criticism—also necessary?” (120).

Turning back now to higher education and the era when “criticism takes command” (122), the story of Creative Writing reaches a crescendo, and the heroic figure for Myers is Norman Foerster, who came to the University of Iowa in 1930 and helped establish Creative Writing as a course of graduate study for the first time there. Known as a “new humanist,” Foerster was dedicated to leaving behind the “the age of philology and minute historical research” (125) while promoting the rise of literary appreciation and criticism. Toward this end, he developed a new graduate program in literary studies that recognized four different areas of specialty, including creative literary practice. Myers emphasizes that Foerster never intended to establish “a vocational school for authors and critics” (126); instead, the original intention, was to develop a more well-rounded course of literary study by including literary practice as one of several components. Creative Writing emerged as an ally of literary criticism, as another method for studying literature “from the inside,” (133) as Foerster once put it. As the New Critics established a strong presence in English departments across the country, so did the notion that literature should be examined as an autonomous object of art, as a product of certain literary techniques that could be analyzed, interpreted, and evaluated in a process that came to be known as “close reading.” Just as this method could be applied to a poem by Marvell or a story by Melville, it could also be applied to student work in a Creative Writing course.

Criticism and the Workshop Method

Myers frames this early marriage between creativity and criticism as the ideal era of Creative Writing history. People like Foerster and the New Critics tempered the unrestrained and unrigorous expression that emerged from progressive education and recharged it with a reverence for standards and tradition (135), as well as an emphasis on reading as the central literary act. This fetishization of reading carries over into the Creative Writing classroom, and what is first officially called a “writers’ workshop” at Iowa in 1939 is arguably not so much a class in writing as in reading—reading student work as a group in order to analyze its technique and evaluate it. Although relations between Literary Studies and Creative Writing would eventually grow contentious as the latter gained more autonomy inside and outside English departments, that reading-based workshop remained remarkably persistent, and continues to persist as the dominant pedagogical mode for the field, even though New Critical close reading and appreciation of literary tradition has fallen out of favor in Literary Studies. Although teachers of Creative Writing tend not to claim their literary critic lineage, Myers points out that they do often justify what they do by asserting that although writing itself cannot be taught, you can teach a student how to read. As Donald Barthelme said, although Creative Writing programs “cannot make students into serious writers,” it’s possible to “teach them how to be critics of their own work” (158).

This resistance to teaching writing—in favor of reading student work—is among the most curious features of the field, and it’s worth asking why this attitude has prevailed for so long. When we say that writing can’t be taught, we’re making the same claim as those who point to the absurdity of trying to workshop poems by Whitman and Dickinson. The social value of literary and artistic practice derives in part from its status as an ultimately inexplicable mystery, that lingering Romantic notion that some folks are born with the talent and genius to make extraordinary art, but the secrets to this special making cannot be reduced to some teaching points or a textbook. I would argue that an even more salient reason for the dominance of the reading-

based workshop is that it can be very easy to teach, often requiring little preparation for the teacher. The content of the standard workshop is provided by the student work, and rather than laboriously commenting on individual drafts—as Composition teachers are famous for doing—the Creative Writing teacher can often let the group critique carry the burden of response.

Another question worth asking: why did the New Critical mode become the whipping boy of Literary Studies in the late twentieth century even while Creative Writing continued (and still continues) to thrive? If the writers' workshop grew out of critical reading, how did it change, or what made it different enough that it could become a major academic industry while literary criticism itself became virtually extinct? Myers doesn't address this question explicitly, except to say that Creative Writing rode the wave of higher education expansion that began with the World War II GI Bill that paid college tuition for ex-soldiers. If the academy has become more democratized, however, this doesn't exactly explain why Creative Writing has benefited from that expansion so much more than some other academic fields. Myers' energy at the end of his account goes toward framing this growth as a misguided effort to transform from a "discipline" into a "profession" (147). No longer committed to the original pedagogical mission, Creative Writing became an "institutional sanctuary" (148) for literary writers who wanted a steady income against the harsh uncertainties of the literary marketplace. As I've demonstrated elsewhere, this criticism of the field as a refuge for literary talent has become pervasive, embraced by commentators attached to diverse political and aesthetic orientations. Rather than being derailed by this debate, I'd like to re-engage the question of why the writers' workshop took the form it took.

Myers makes a convincing case that the workshop method grew out of criticism's privileging of close textual analysis, but he provides little evidence that early Creative Writing teachers themselves made a strong case for this method, to themselves or anyone else. It appears that the reading-based, group-critique structure just appeared as the natural and obvious choice,

given that literary criticism was so much in the air in the mid-twentieth century. In other words, Myers' account implies that no one ever suggested that other kinds of "work" might usefully happen in the workshop. Strangely enough, Myers provides some evidence that evaluative workshopping was practiced within the progressive education movement, even though he also asserts that Mearns and company lacked a critical sensibility. "What would come to be known as the 'workshop method' grew out of progressive ideas about teaching" (116), says Myers. And this method is "communal making and communal criticism" (118). What does this communal activity actually look like in practice?

Myers finds evidence that progressive educators did use a structure similar to the one we call "the writers' workshop" today. In Mearns's courses, for example, "Students mimeographed their writings and these were 'given to the class, then criticized, rewritten by the author and criticized many times'" (117). This description sounds like the kind of activity that's dedicated to producing excellent products, using criticism as an efficient means for the writer to determine how to achieve that successful poem or story. And yet Myers also quotes Mearns as saying: "[F]rankly we do not care much about the product itself, our interest goes out to the value in growth of personality that comes from genuine self-expression" (118). So Mearns here advocates a more student-centered pedagogy, and this suggests that what matters in the classroom is practice and process: "There can be no failure...when one continually produces" (118). Myers seems to grow annoyed with this kind of standardless democracy in the classroom, so even though he traces the workshop method's origins directly to progressive education, his ideal workshop method is clearly one that has more critical edge, the kind that developed at the University of Iowa in the context of the graduate Creative Writing course.

The Writers' Club: Precursor to the Iowa Writers' Workshop

Sixteen years before Myers published his 1996 account, Stephen Wilbers published *The Iowa Writers' Workshop*, a more narrowly focused history of the first and most famous Creative Writing program in higher education. Wilbers argues that what we call the writers' workshop was at least in part an appropriation of the student-run writers' clubs that had been popular at the University of Iowa since the 1890s. Their precursors, the literary societies, popular since the 1860s, were focused more on the study of literature and the practice of public speaking and debating skills. The writers' clubs, however, were devoted to those students who wanted to "learn and actually practice the craft of writing" (20), and were run much the same way, Wilbers asserts, as today's workshops:

Their purpose was to improve the participants' skills as writers by allowing each member to have a turn reading his or her original work, after which the group would respond with suggestions and literary criticism. While there was nothing particularly unique about this approach (writers have always asked friends and colleagues for feedback), the practice formalized by these clubs provided a format that could be incorporated into the classroom. Accordingly, the method (later to be called the 'workshop' approach was adopted by the University when it offered its first course in creative writing, entitled "Verse-making Class," in the spring of 1897. (20)

So for several decades prior to the official founding of Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1939, there was a "reciprocal influence" between the workshop-like writers' clubs and the university's English department. Among the earliest figures who promoted this relationship was Clarke Fisher Ansley, the department's head from 1899 to 1917. Although the writer's clubs were generally held by students outside of official class time, a number of faculty had close ties to them as former or honorary members. Ansley was one of these teachers, and he energetically promoted

creative literary activity among students; a colleague described him as “probably the first person to envision the University of Iowa as a center for creative writing” (10).

In 1905, Ansley recruited another important faculty advocate for Creative Writing at Iowa, Edwin Ford Piper, who would soon establish a writers’ club as a kind of informal extension of his regular literature courses. This writers’ club was described by one of Piper’s students as follows:

Attendance is optional, but there are few of us who fail to find our way in the late afternoon to Mr. Piper’s basement office, where we sit in nooks between bookcases or even share a table with heaps of papers and magazines, and read the stories and poems and essays we have written for the comments of one another and of our leader. In that group, as rarely elsewhere in my experience, there was practiced by Mr. Piper the principle of criticism which I believe to be the only right one for dealing with student work: “Something to praise, something to blame.” (22)

This passage reads a bit like a scene from a Harry Potter-like fantasy about finding a doorway to magic within the stern, rule-bound environment of the educational institution. More importantly, it confirms that the workshop method was in practice before it became an official course of study; that Creative Writing’s origins are found at least partly in a kind of extracurricular activity that students actually helped establish and promote suggests that it was to some degree a bottom-up enterprise that addressed the wants and needs of students directly, rather than being a top-down prescription from institutional authorities.

Excellence Vs. “Mere Twaddle”

Why would students freely choose this kind of arrangement? What’s attractive about sitting around with a group of writers sharing and criticizing each other’s work? One persuasive

answer might be that participants want to improve as writers by learning how successful their writing is and how to make it even more successful, and that getting a range of responses from other practitioners in an appointed time and place is a particularly efficient means of achieving this improvement. A more cynical answer might be that participants are less interested in improving as in receiving confirmation that they are good.

This may seem like a too subtle difference, especially if you consider that many students may want to improve so that they will eventually be called good. The motivation to improve, however, does not necessarily come attached to the desire for arrival at some level of excellence. Anyone interested in cooking will likely have a desire to sharpen and expand their cooking skills, but being officially labeled as an excellent cook may not even occur to them. A person may practice yoga for a lifetime and make enormous improvements without ever expecting to arrive at some final status as an outstanding yogi. Such practices may be dismissed as a mere hobby, rather than an art or a profession, but it's worth remembering that the evaluative impulse is not naturally and inevitably bound up in whatever we do.

Of course achieving the status of an "excellent" poetry or fiction writer, especially among the highly literate circles of a college campus, can be beneficial, empowering, and pleasurable. But calling someone "excellent" often requires that someone else be called "not excellent"; a system of evaluation requires hierarchies of value. Someone's value is determined largely in relation to another person's value, by comparison; this makes the group dynamic of the writers' club/workshop a very effective and efficient evaluation machine. Like a free market economic system, the workshop generates competition because there is a scarcity of "excellent" labels. In other words, only some fraction of the whole group can be called "the best," and the rest must be called "less than the best."

This competition may not be inherently bad or good, but competition surely has a range of effects that have ethical consequences. One effect may be that the striving for excellence in

relation to one another motivates participants to improve more than they would otherwise. Another effect may be that participants feel increased pressure to control the definitions of excellence within the group. This battle for control over authority within the workshop is one of its most distinctive features, and one that has produced a vast amount of gossip in the literary world. Even a century ago, in that writers' club in the cozy basement of the fair-minded Piper, intense competition could manifest. According to Wilbers' account, one participant described Piper's group as follows:

As I recall his students in Creative Writing met as a group once a week, read manuscript, and criticized each other's productions. He used to tell us to keep our remarks constructive—but sometimes they were not. The atmosphere sometimes became quite heated. I remember being completely squelched on my first reading by Bob Thackaberry's remark that he considered my poems "mere twaddle." (11)

I call this kind of narrative a "workshop war story" because it tells of an aesthetic or personal battle that unfolds in the context of the traditional Creative Writing class, and it's remarkable how pervasive this narrative genre is, how rich a part of the field's folklore it has become. Piper may have done his best to temper the mean-spirited impulses within the club, but that didn't prevent Mr. Thackaberry from launching a "mere twaddle" at his fellow club member.

The Debate about Origins & the "Top Ten"

For better or worse, Piper's writers' group proved to be much like the model that would come to dominate Creative Writing pedagogy. In fact, at Iowa, Piper's courses were the first to be called workshops on an unofficial basis. Strangely, it wasn't until his death in 1939 that the term "Writers' Workshop" officially appeared in the University of Iowa course catalogue (Wilbers 52). In *The Elephant's Teach*, Myers gives Norman Foerster most of the credit for creating the larger

institutional conditions that allowed the Iowa Writers' Workshop to be established, having already established the concentration in literary writing as part of the graduate program in Literary Studies. In fact, Myers explicitly dismisses Wilbers' assertion that the workshop method was largely the offspring of student-run writer's clubs, preferring to keep Creative Writing origins within the official boundaries of the academy and the classroom. Nonetheless, he quotes Foerster's own vision for the graduate course in Creative Writing as a seminar that would be "a sort of literary club presided over by a professor keenly interested in writers' problems" (137). This passage suggests that Foerster did indeed recognize the "literary club" as an already established and useful model for the Creative Writing course, and yet an important component of this club is that a professor has substantial control over it. So the origins of the workshop method can be seen as a blending of two conventional forms: the club and the course.

Illuminating this synthesis further is a brief account called "The Emergence of the Writers' Workshop," by John Gerber, who joined the Iowa faculty in 1944. Gerber implicitly sets out to correct the view held by Myers, saying, "The point worth repeating is that creative writing was an important part of the English curriculum before Norman Foerster arrived in 1930" (226). He goes on to say that both Piper and [Wilbur] Schramm deserve to be called the workshop's founders, the former because he "established the workshop format" (227), the latter because he "directed the first seminar formally called the Writers' Workshop. Furthermore, it was during this period that the term came to signify not a single course but the whole body of courses devoted to creative writing" (228). Like Wilbers, Gerber stresses that the workshop did not come wholly formed out of one person's vision; rather it evolved over time and involved a number of figures promoting literary practice in different ways. The implication is that Creative Writing was in the air at Iowa well before it was officially designated as a program of study.

Rather than offering a simpler story of origins, these competing accounts dramatize the complexities of authority in the traditional workshop method. Despite its evident ties to the

writer's club, the workshop is finally determined by the professor in an officially-sanctioned, for-credit course; on the other hand, the workshop has a vastly different structure of authority than a conventional lecture format, physically bringing the teacher into a circle of equal-opportunity voices. From the first angle, authority has become more vertical and top-down; from the second angle, authority has become more horizontal and equally distributed. But neither angle provides a solid, predictable portrait of how power operates in Creative Writing classroom.

Because the workshop blurs that line between informal writers' club and formal academic course, it can intensify the competition for authority and its damaging effects. If a handful of peers gets together informally to share and discuss their writing, the stakes are likely to be low enough that intense competition for power within the group will not be rewarded, so a more agreeable and communal atmosphere is likely to prevail. But when that same form takes place in an officially sanctioned institutional setting, with a course title such as "Advanced Poetry Writing," and in the presence of a well-known, published author, the stakes may change dramatically. Participants may perceive that there's more power to be had, and given the democratized access to that power, there may be much greater incentive to compete within this high-stakes group than within the low-stakes group.

Those who champion the democratic structure of the workshop often forget that problems of power don't disappear in democratic systems. As more power becomes available, and as more participants have access to that power, there can be increased competition for it, more intense struggles to acquire more by taking it away from others. Inequities still exist in free market democracies, of course, but those inequities are often masked by the rhetoric of freedom. The traditional workshop's particular blend of democratic and hierarchical forces, I argue, can be particularly volatile and damaging.

A fascinating feature of the early incarnation of the Iowa program is that students appear to have had a substantial amount of individual attention from teachers, meeting one-on-one with

them every week in the early stages of the program, then moving on to “group conferences” later. Less experienced students were thought to require more individualized direction and response from teachers; eventually those students were weaned from this direct supervision and given more authority to participate in groups. This sounds like a self-evident process of democratization and empowering of students, but it turns out that there was a real hierarchy in place and a substantial reward waiting at the end of this process for the most elite students.

A report in the University’s newspaper from that time—describing the newly established Writers’ Workshop and how students progress from individual to group conferences—is punctuated with this titillating tidbit: “The most envied group in the Workshop is the ‘top ten’ who meet fortnightly at the homes of Schramm and Engle” [the 1st and 2nd directors of the Workshop, respectively] (Wilbers 53). It’s remarkable that this report can call a certain group of students “the most envied” without even flinching or questioning such a designation, as if that kind of overt selectivity were a natural component of such a program. Imagine the social dynamics generated by that “top ten” group—the gossip about who’s in and who’s out, the thrill of being given one of the sacred spots, the bitter defeat of never being among the chosen. I doubt many graduate Creative Writing programs these days would be so bold as to call an advanced workshop the “top ten,” and perhaps it’s too easy to look back over half a century and smile at the absurdity, arrogance, and insensitivity of such a designation. Nonetheless, that “top ten” sensibility—that impulse to evaluate and rank—is arguably built into every traditional workshop course and Creative Writing program, even if such a term is no longer used.

Interlude 2.1

Among the Most Well-Educated Motherfuckers

I can't look at the snow fall without hoping for school to be cancelled. My life depends on the radio angel saying we're going to get twelve inches on the ground. I decide to run for governor so I can declare a snow day. Like a governor, I'm happy in a white mess. I'm lucky to have parents who are lost in the snow. My state is being wiped by toilet paper. My state makes a whispery song. We make songs in music class. Everyone gets a little drum and we rub the skins with our fingers. That's the sound of snow falling. The trees listen. The branches collect the flakes who are afraid of falling all the way. When the ground wants to get fat, it snows. The more it snows, the less it hurts to fall on the ground. The fattest continent is Antarctica, and I'm running for governor of it. Every day I have to eat. Every day the school cafeteria serves a kind of meat. Except on snow days, where does the meat go then? Does it peek inside the incubator to see if the fuzzy chicks have hatched? Does it look out the window to see if it's snowing fuzzy chicks? But not all the eggs can hatch. Some things die before being born, some die later. It's like a game show—I'm the contestant, the answer is chicken salad. My hat grows white feathers, I call it macaroni. I feel a little sick. My hat fills with vomit. I call it macaroni. I have to go—so I go to the snowy hill. I use my favorite teacher as a sled. My favorite teacher is naked. I lie down on that pretty flesh, and we go. Yankee Doodle going to Antarctica. Then there's too much going. I begin to cry. My naked sled spends all night forgiving me and giving me an "A." But I've already died of shame. I never go back to school. It never stops snowing.

Movement 2.1

Workshop War Stories

My War Story

I am a graduate of an MFA program, but I don't want to present myself as a wounded veteran of that experience. My poetry was not usually attacked directly by teachers or fellow students, and I did not graduate with feelings of bitter animosity toward anyone. Nonetheless, if I survey the larger landscape of that program, if I recall the system of relations among students and teachers, what I recall most are the factions, the points of conflict, the personality problems and tensions, the winners and losers. These social dynamics may sound like those in any institutional setting, but in a Creative Writing program those tensions can actually be produced by the workshop itself. In other words, the tensions don't just occur in the hallways and the cafeteria but in the classroom, in the social dynamics of the workshop group, and much of the tension that happens outside the classroom refers back to what happened inside.

After a workshop meeting, students would peel off into sub-groups to debrief and gossip about how A's poem got torn apart by B, how X's poem received excessive praise from Y, how M got huffy and N got a little too boastful about having been published in a crappy magazine, how student S was totally sucking up to teacher Z, etc. Although the extracurricular gossip—about who's dating, who's getting dumped, who's dressing poorly, and who's hot—still

flourishes in this setting, the primary gossip material refers to the student work itself and how that work is evaluated in the workshop.

Perhaps the harshest critique I ever received came from a woman in my workshop who announced that my poetry—along with that of another male student—contained too many references to weak, passive, diminutive females; together we constituted a new poetry school she mockingly called “the little girl school.” Her critique may have been accurate and justified, and I recall avoiding all references to women in my poetry for the rest of that semester. What I remember most of all, however, is how strongly this incident defined the workshop’s social relations that semester. The “little girl school” became an ongoing point of contentious debate and the source of much late night conversation in bars. Everyone in the workshop seemed to divide into various camps: those who agreed with her critique, those who didn’t, those who remained neutral or just didn’t seem to care. There was speculation about why two men—one straight and the other gay—had both included images of little girls in several of their poems. There was speculation about why this fellow female student had made such a vigorous indictment against those men. Were the men ignorant and sexist? Was the woman bitter because she felt inadequate about her own writing?

There may have been important lessons for all of us seeded in this experience—about being aware of how gender functions in our writing, for example—but none of us had the ability to access these lessons because the very structure of the workshop transformed the potential lessons into a contest to gain more authority in the classroom. What I find especially interesting about this war story is that the objection to my poetry was not even grounded in aesthetic values; instead, my colleague was invoking social values that have emerged from certain strains of feminism. Critics of the traditional workshop method often point to the limitations of a purely aesthetic criticism, the short-sightedness of talking about craft as a matter merely of techniques, style, form. But the “little girl school” critique shows that aesthetics is not the only filter through

which a workshop evaluation can be articulated. What traditional workshops have in common may be less a focus on craft than a structure that encourages competitive evaluation. In any case, our teacher certainly made no attempt to address the situation or transform it into a learning opportunity. It was just another contentious comment in a sea of separate evaluations.

Most of those workshop discussions were less confrontational and much more banal. Evaluations were more likely to be asserted indirectly or through silence. Indeed, what's not said in these discussions may often have more power than what is said. A common strategy for expressing disapproval about a piece of writing is to say nothing, and when the silence is widespread throughout the group, the pain and awkwardness can be excruciating, until some compassionate sucker rescues the group with some strained and solicitous comments. What is heard in the workshop often fits into the category of the mixed review—a few scraps of enthusiastic praise followed by the tenderly worded list of failings or suggestions for improvement: “I really love how this final stanza returns to the image of the sunset, but I don't trust the speaker's sentimentality there.” There may be enormous truth in this criticism, but does it really function as an effective teaching tool? And more importantly, what's missing from this kind of discussion?

When Teachers Kill Their Students

The scandal factor increases significantly when the teacher's comments are involved, especially if the teacher is famous. Stories about a big-name professor bashing a student's work can become mythic within a particular program, and sometimes within the larger literary culture. While I was a student I heard about an incident that had supposedly occurred a couple years before I arrived, so the narrative had been handed down through several generations of in-coming cohorts. Apparently, during a workshop session, after a student had read her awful poem aloud, after a prolonged wait for someone to begin the agonizing critique, the teacher intervened.

Turning his copy of the poem over to its blank side, he said to the class, “well, I find this side of the poem more interesting than the other side. Let’s move on to the next poem.”

It’s hard to imagine a more devastating, dismissive comment. Even if the story is apocryphal, it’s believable and vivid enough to be thoroughly captivating. Every time I heard it or thought about it or told it to others, I felt the shudder of relief that I had not been the victim, along with the shudder of awe that a teacher could be so swift, fierce, and merciless. Although we feared and resented such unkindness, we also respected the brutal “honesty,” how quickly that teacher had cut through that wishy-washy workshopese. The notion that harsh criticism is a form of honesty rather than an aggressive assertion of one person’s critical opinion is central to the traditional workshop. The problem with workshops, we often hear, is that so few participants are really willing to be honest; everyone fears retaliation, so what gets said is a veil of equivocal, noncommittal fluff.

Another incident that apparently occurred while I was a student, in one of the fiction workshops, became an instant legend. After a student read a short, unconventional piece of prose fiction to the group, the famous teacher looked at the author and said, “well, do you want to spend your time writing experimental nonsense like this, or do you want to write real short stories?” Gesturing to the program’s most well-published fiction student, sitting just to his left, the famous professor continued, “Stories like Mr. _____ here writes, the kind that get published in *The New Yorker*.” If this tale of workshop trauma had only involved a student’s writing being obliterated, it would certainly be provocative. What really grabbed us, though, was how that other student, Mr. _____, had been dragged into the bloodbath to serve as an aesthetic ideal. This teacher had explicitly pit one student against another as if initiating a dog fight. At the time, we probably viewed this incident as an ugly exception, and we were grateful to have escaped such terrible evisceration. I wonder, though, if the story really stunned us because it revealed how those workshops really work. What may have taken an hour to say in much more tempered, circuitous

language—and perhaps only felt intuitively by the participants—was laid bare in this one brutal moment of clarity. While that clarity claims to reveal an aesthetic truth, I would argue that it obfuscates how the workshop really functions. The workshop is built to idealize the moments of brutal criticism, but it is these moments that actually conceal how the workshop operates as a field of aesthetic values competing for legitimation.

Remembering and Dismembering the Teachers

The Iowa Writer's Workshop is the oldest and most famous graduate Creative Writing program in the country. This unlikely literary powerhouse surrounded by midwestern cornfields has produced a remarkably long list of MFAs who have gone on to publish books, win awards, and receive critical acclaim. This prestige has helped generate a number of personal recollections of literary education that make reference to Iowa and to the teachers these writers encountered there, some of which have been collected by Robert Dana in *A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and The Iowa Writers' Workshop*. Often these published accounts by former students exude a glowing nostalgia for a teacher's cranky eccentricity or tough-love encouragement, although many pieces betray a lingering bitterness and animosity toward certain figures. Whatever the attitude of the former student, these sketches consistently reveal a pedagogy of conflict, confrontation, and competition at Iowa.

In an account of long-time Iowa teacher Donald Justice, Charles Wright emphasizes how serious and intense Justice was about everything, including writing. Apparently Justice loved engaging in contests or competitive games, and Wright recalls how a group of students and teachers would regularly meet in the Student Union to fight fierce ping-pong battles that were usually won by Justice. Wright suggests that this spirit of rivalry pervaded the whole Workshop and his own process of writing: "Competition. Much competition. It had a wonderful effect on one's poems. The push to get them written. The desire to get them written right for the proper

praise from the proper people” (188). This curious word—“proper”—suggests that the goal is not only to acquire praise, but to understand that certain kinds of praise and certain praise-givers are better than others. How does one identify “the proper praise” and “the proper people,” and why might this kind of approval have such a “wonderful effect”? What does it mean for an inexperienced writer to habitually use the possibility of external affirmation as a primary source of motivation?

Wright’s reflections are particularly provocative for me because I happen to have taken a workshop with him as an undergraduate at the University of Virginia. I know exactly how exhilarating “proper praise” can be, because Wright gave plenty of it to me in his quiet, reserved way. I hadn’t read much of his or anyone’s poetry at that very early point in my writing career, but I had heard that he was the most famous poet in town, and he did have an impressive presence—tidy, handsome, and soft-spoken in a way that made everyone lean toward him with a breathless urgency. He uttered clipped, elliptical phrases that cut right to the core of things, and we students were awed by this eloquence. He was not mean-spirited toward anyone in that workshop, and there wasn’t an overt sense of hostility or competition among us. But we did spend all of class time criticizing each other’s work, and we certainly all craved his affirmation. Wright gave out his praise judiciously, with a measured sense of respect for how rarely art is praiseworthy. Often it came at the end of a discussion about a poem, as papers were being shuffled—Wright would give a penetrating glance toward the writer, and say, “well done.” Without ever acknowledging it, everyone in the room knew the value of that gesture, and more often, when he withheld that kind of affirmation, we all knew the value of that absence.

The desire for Wright’s approval probably did have some kind of “wonderful effect” on my poetry; certainly I was inspired to write for him, to view him as my audience, and in a short time I produced lots of poetry that became part of a manuscript that was considered good enough to gain admission into a respected MFA program. Were there other, not-so-wonderful effects of

that longing for approval? For that promise of praise, did I trade a stronger trust in my own longterm writing practice, an awareness of my real tendencies and needs as a writer? What if Wright or any other teacher had removed the evaluative element from the workshop entirely—I mean, what if we talked about poetry without ever applying labels like “good” and “bad.” What if we had considered *how* poetry works rather than how *well* it works. Or what if we had spent class time engaged in other activities entirely? These are legitimate questions rarely asked in the history of Creative Writing pedagogy.

Even the bitterest attacks against individual teachers rarely consider a fundamental alternative to the standardized workshop method; instead, they argue that teacher X or Y failed to use that method effectively, because he was too harsh or too lazy or inequitable in his treatment of students. Philip Levine’s essay, “Mine Own John Berryman,” is as much an homage to Berryman’s teaching as it is a tirade against the teaching of Robert Lowell. Levine encountered both of these icons at Iowa, and after narrating a series of gossipy anecdotes about them, he sums up his assessment of the two as teachers, lashing out at how Lowell’s

favoritism, his intimacy with some students and visible boredom with others, tended to divide us into two hostile factions, the ins and the outs. In John’s class we were all in and we were all out, we were equals, and instead of sinking, we swam together. In spite of John’s willingness to be disliked, he clearly was not disliked. Of course he was a marvelous companion, and on those evenings he sought company we were all eager to supply it, but we never forgot that, come Monday afternoon, the camaraderie would be forgotten and he would get to the serious business of evaluating and if need be decimating poems. (180)

So Berryman’s effectiveness as a teacher seems to be based primarily on his willingness to decimate *all* the students’ poems rather than only *some* of them. Levine’s assertion and evidence that the two poets had different effects on students is convincing, but he doesn’t recognize that

they're still working with basically the same evaluative model of teaching—making pronouncements about what is good and what is bad. Whether some or all students are within reach of the teacher's decimation, what is the effect of a pedagogy that allows critical decimation to take place at all?

Particularly fascinating about Levine's assessment is that he begins the whole essay with bitterly sarcastic cynicism about the whole Creative Writing field, poking fun in particular at the common notion that institutionalization has democratized poetry:

One can only regard [Creative Writing] as one of the most amazing growth industries we have. Thus, at the same time we've made our society more racist, more scornful of the rights of the poor, more imperialist, more elitist, more tawdry, money-driven, selfish, and less accepting of minority opinions, we have democratized poetry. Today anyone can become a poet: all he or she need do is travel to the nearest college and enroll in Beginning Poetry Writing and then journey through the dozen stages of purgatory...and thus earn not only an MFA but a crown of plastic laurel leaves. Do I sound skeptical? Let me sound skeptical. (161)

Clearly Levine doesn't believe the hype about Creative Writing in general, but would he say that Berryman's educational methods amounted to real democracy because all the students felt equally vulnerable to his brutal attacks? Perhaps Levine's point here is that poetry should *not* strive to be democratic, and that Berryman so respected the rarity and selectivity of great talent that he refused to let any single student delude himself with such grandeur. In any case, Levine joins many others in defining the function of the workshop as the passing of (often harsh) literary judgment, and yet he's not willing to recognize that this function could be the very source of his skepticism about the field.

W.D. Snodgrass, another poet who earned an MFA at Iowa in its early post-World War II years and went on to considerable acclaim, published four decades later a weirdly embittered and often scathing survey of teachers he encountered there. Although he does express qualified affection for some of these characters, most of them seem to be memorable for their unique style of attacking or humiliating students. He seems especially tormented by Randall Jarrell, who once called him a “second-rate Lowell” (131). Over the years, says Snodgrass, “I tended to keep my distance, knowing how cutting he could be at anything less than total acquiescence. Several times, he had sliced me to ribbons...” (143). Even more scandalous is the anecdote Snodgrass relates about John Ciardi, who brought to the class a “sense of intellectual posturing and emptiness,” and whose workshop method involved drawing “a blue line across the page at the point he would have stopped if not paid to continue” (137). This image of the blue line is startling in part because it so vividly exemplifies what some onlookers call brutal “honesty,” and in this case the truth being told is not only about the poor quality of the student work but about the real (monetary) motivation for certain teachers. But Snodgrass doesn’t flatter Ciardi as a truth-sayer; instead, he dismisses him as a hack among hack teachers, flawed because he brought a flawed attitude and aesthetic into the standard system of workshop evaluation.

Engle’s World (The Rest Of Us Just Live In It)

As the title of Dana’s collection implies, the central figure under discussion is Paul Engle, director of the Writers’ Workshop from 1942 to 1965, and the person who probably deserves the most credit for making that program so successful. Engle himself had been among the earliest graduate Creative Writing students at Iowa, earning a master’s degree in 1932 and quickly becoming a national poetry superstar, publishing books that received strong critical acclaim, including a *New York Times Book Review* cover introducing Engle as a “New Voice in American

Poetry.” Returning to Iowa as a faculty member, Engle took over as director of the Workshop, pouring enormous time into building and promoting that fledgling program. While D.G. Myers faults him for steering that program away from its original ties to Literary Studies, ties that had been so important for Norman Foerster, Engle appears to have understood early on that Creative Writing could survive and even thrive as a more autonomous entity.

There’s widespread consensus that Engle was very effective at raising money and other resources for the Workshop, both inside and outside the university, and generating powerful publicity for the program in the local and national press. He was a strong supporter of those he thought worthy, often offering help to those in crisis, but he was a big personality with big opinions, and if Engle was not on your side, he could be difficult and offensive. Snodgrass admits that he was a “superb administrator” and occasionally, when teaching great literary texts, a “brilliant teacher” (122), but when it came to addressing student work, says Snodgrass, he was “obsessed with symptoms” and “reverted to a sort of knee-jerk New Criticism” (123). Snodgrass even suggests that Engle’s own artistic decline after receiving early popular acclaim led him to be manipulative, petty in his assertions of power, and unfair in his distribution of institutional support. Among the primary effects of this difficult environment, claims Snodgrass, is that students with great potential encountered creative, psychological, or financial blocks to their writing: “we had far too many exceptionally gifted students unable, for long periods, to produce anything....Surely part of the cause lay in their relations with the director” (123).

A number of commentators focus on Engle’s obsession with talent—spotting talent in prospective or new students, recruiting new faculty and visiting writers with talent, declaring where the talent could be found in the literary canon. It’s clear that the Workshop’s function, for Engle, was not simply to give students access to creative literacy skills but to produce the most exceptional literary talent possible. Success for the Workshop would be measured entirely by the success of its teachers and students in the literary publishing world, and for Engle, the workshop

method was primarily a training ground for the hard-knocks world of real-life editors, agents, critics, and other arbiters of artistic judgment. In an essay called “The Writer and the Place,” Engle explicitly frames his pedagogical vision, in his own words:

Right criticism can speed up the maturing of a poet by years. More than that, tough and detailed criticism of a young writer can help him become his own shrewd critic so that, when he publishes, the critics will not have to be tough on him.... We knock, or persuade, or terrify, the false tenderness toward his own work out of the beginning writer. This is the beginning of wisdom.... To have your work read by all members of the workshop, and publicly criticized and praised by your instructors in the weekly meetings, represents a helpful and at the same time less hazardous form of publication.... The writer finds that the students around him are alert to his faults and quick to praise his virtues.... For as long as he is part of this community, he has a useful competition with those around him, and at the same time is freed from the imperatives of the marketplace, as he may never be again. He can have the manner of publication without losing too much blood. (Dana 4-5)

It’s worth considering the kind of terms Engle uses here. On the one hand, the Creative Writing program and classroom is a kind of refuge or safe house, temporarily insulating the less-experienced writer from the harsh elements outside in the marketplace of literary publishing and critical judgment. On the other hand, the Workshop must simulate and reproduce that harsh outside, in order to toughen up the innocent, vulnerable, virgin-like apprentices. To “terrify” the student, then, is to approximate the violent conditions outside, and yet spare the poor neophyte from “losing too much blood.”

In effect, the workshop reproduces the competition and violence of the marketplace the way basic military training reproduces battle scenarios for new soldiers. In both cases, the less

experienced are supposed to become stronger and more skilled at confronting “the enemy” by repeatedly experiencing approximations of the mental and physical challenges they’ll encounter in “the real war.” While soldiers are famous for putting the interests of their whole unit ahead of their own interests, however, the workshop is built to put enemies in the same room, individual soldiers fighting for their own slice of literary authority. Engle repeatedly suggests that workshop students form a community, and of course it’s true that many friendships and bonds are formed in any institutional setting like this, especially a setting in which participants are all passionately engaged in the same kind of activity. But does that sense of community require the kind of competition that Engle calls for? And does that competition actually damage the full communal potential of such a group?

Teachers to the Rescue?

Reading through a range of reminiscences about the Writers’ Workshop, I find more war stories about competition within the ranks of students than about unkind treatment of students by faculty. In fact, one common theme in this institutional folklore is the tale of the teacher who rescues the victimized student from the snapping jaws of her bloodthirsty peers. William Cotter Murray’s look back at his Workshop experiences, for example, relates how his first story up for group discussion was “massacred,” and yet his protective teacher, Marguerite Young, “did her best to bring up positive points against a barrage of attacks from the “young writers.” The barrage was apparently too overwhelming to fend off. “I listened for a while from the back of the room,” says Murray, “and then I felt sick. I lit out, down to the river, west of the barracks where I vomited my guts out” (202). Soon after, the kind-hearted Young appeared, having followed Murray like a nurse looking for her wounded. She offered him consoling words and advice to ignore the criticisms of those other students, followed by some gentle suggestions about how to

improve his story. Here again, both teacher and student present the brutal workshop criticism as a kind of unfortunate inevitability, and neither of them can conceive of a real alternative, only strategies for healing the wounds.

In another piece that sketches some memories of Vance Bourjaily, one of the key early Creative Writing teachers at Iowa, Eugene Garber tells about a student whose story, written in a then unfashionable style, was being attacked in workshop: “For the student apostles of the well made story and clean prose criticizing this piece was like shooting fish in a barrel. But Vance put a quick stop to the carnage, not by defending the story where it was weak but by setting us an exegetical task: what did the story mean, what was the writer trying to accomplish?” (208). What Bourjaily did with these questions, it appears, is redirect the conversation from evaluative criticism to non-evaluative analysis, and he may have understood that there is so much that is useful to say about writing that doesn’t rely on pronouncing it good or bad. The questions of meaning and intention can lead to some sticky and unproductive speculation, but they do point away from the “I like this/I don’t like this” drone. The simplest and most useful question might be: what is this piece doing? What effects does it create for readers, and how does it create these effects?

I’ve heard plenty of these teacher rescue stories in my own conversations. How often has the unrecognized but talented student gone to her teacher’s office hours and complained about being misunderstood by her fellow classmates, or being confused about so many different opinions about her work? How often has the empathetic and sagacious mentor told that student to ignore what the others say, or only listen to the comments that are useful (positive?), thus creating a one-on-one bond through opposition to the petty opinions of the regulars? Among the problems with these kinds of rescue missions is that they treat symptoms of the workshop disease without addressing the conditions that cause the disease. What if that teacher had developed a different kind of pedagogy that prevents students from evaluating each other in the first place?

Sibling Rivalry in the Workshop

By far the most common kind of workshop war story I've encountered, particularly about the Iowa Writers' Workshop, involves competition among the students themselves. Dana's collection, for example, includes a sassy piece by Robert Bly, who unlike most others in this volume, refuses to qualify his cynicism with any silver linings. Describing his earlier undergraduate workshop at Harvard, he says, "all we did was attack [the teacher] Archibald MacLeish and belittle his friends such as Ezra Pound and Ernest Hemingway." But things were different at Iowa in his first workshop with Paul Engle:

We didn't attack the teacher this time; in general, the aggression went against each other. Everyone knew that W.D. Snodgrass, the graduate of an earlier workshop and still hovering in the neighborhood somewhere, had done something introspective and important in poems later called *Heart's Needle*. But he had to be careful if he turned up, because knives seems to be out for him. (39)

Bly portrays a workshop paradoxically built to select the best talent while killing the best talent with knives. One student's success requires another student's failure in the economy of literary evaluation. Bly continues:

The workshop discussions were actually a little pedestrian; certain fads among the poets would dominate for a while. That's always the case with workshops. At the end Paul would come in and say rather sensible remarks. Given my history with MacLeish, whose lofty pronouncements floated down from some earlier heaven, this workshop was my first experience of literary democracy, even perhaps of that horizontal and envy-ridden culture which I later called sibling. (40)

You can feel Bly straining here to say nice things about Engle, perhaps feeling some pressure to join the celebration Dana's collection implies, but it's clear that Bly is not willing to advocate for the traditional workshop method. Unlike most commentators, he doesn't throw around a term like "literary democracy" without recognizing that such a system can be problematic and full of contradictions ("envy-ridden" while appearing to be more equitable, for example). In one of his well-known books of non-fiction, *The Sibling Society*, Bly gives fuller diagnoses to this problem of the horizontal society in which everyone is childlike and competing for attention; while his solution—to reclaim a tradition of paternal authority—is simplistic and specious, I do think it's illuminating to consider the workshop method as a system that generates sibling rivalry.

In his history of the Workshop, Wilbers devotes much of the final chapter, "The Workshop Experience," to this issue of competition among students. Attempting to keep an historian's sense of balance and objectivity, he opens with this nonetheless provocative overview:

Participating in a program like the Iowa Writer's Workshop can be as exhilarating and inspiring as it can be stifling and discouraging. Depending on individual temperament and needs, a writer might flourish from the association with other writers or flounder from the pressure of competition. Those who profit from their participation in the program at Iowa commonly cite the benefits of an environment in which writing is taken seriously and in which time is made available for writing, while those who do not profit often point to the damaging effects of unsympathetic criticism and to loss of artistic identity. (125)

Wilbers then presents a series of testimonies from people who have been students or faculty in the Workshop, and it's noteworthy how often they make reference to tensions among the students.

Even those who celebrate the Workshop feel compelled to acknowledge this lingering question, as Marvin Bell does, saying,

The best thing we do, I think, is to create an atmosphere of friendliness and respect for the art. That doesn't always work for every person at every time. There're people who feel it's a really unfriendly place. Some people benefit by feeling that they're fighting everyone. They fight the Workshop all the way. They go home every single night saying, "Those sons of bitches don't understand me and don't appreciate me," and they grow that way. Other people don't benefit at all and just turn around and leave. But most people, I think, would agree that it's pretty much a friendly place, that people respect people for being writers or at least don't hold it against them. (126)

It's hard to have been through traditional workshopping and not smile with recognition at the fighter who gripes about how "those sons of bitches don't understand me." In my own experience, while I didn't witness many people rejecting the MFA program entirely, I did see how often students would take on that defiant fighter persona, either explicitly in bitch-sessions outside of class, or implicitly in their mood or gestures. Obviously it would be hard to quantify how pervasive the fighter attitude is among MFA students, but what if it's much more pervasive than Bell thinks it is? More importantly, is it really necessary to produce this fighter attitude at all? Bell and others talk about the workshop the way generals often talk about war: in both cases one must expect casualties. For the greater good of winning the war, sacrifices must be made, certain men have to be the first ones off the boats at Normandy. If excellence is going to prevail, we have to expect that some of the not-so-excellent will fall by the wayside.

The Workshop director who followed Engle, John Leggett, said this about the competition among Workshop students:

For the most part I think that it works in his favor, but, sure, I *have* seen people who freeze up here if they feel that they're doing something different from the general run of Workshop students and if they try a worksheet, particularly if it's

obscure or difficult, and they're badly beaten in the workshop. I've seen people freeze up. I've seen them dry up and not be able to stand to be here. I've seen people, who are neurotic to begin with, become even more so and find that they just can't stay here. It's too much for them. But that's fairly rare. (132)

Leggett goes on to make a very convincing case that students will often write at their very best when they sense that immediate connection to readers in their workshop. An unpublished writer who has no one to share work with may indeed have only an abstract and underdeveloped notion of audience. Sharing work with fellow students, however, does not require that those students also evaluate each other. Achieving that sense of an immediate, living audience does not mean that anyone needs to get "badly beaten." The possibility of critical violence is an element built into the traditional workshop method, but there are other methods available for sharing student work.

Wilbers received testimonies from a number of former Workshop students, and these often show less willingness to defend that program's conflict orientation, although a number of them offered an ambivalent view. Joe Bellamy, for example, reports that he looks back on the experience in the Workshop as a positive one, although as a student he was disenchanted: "It seems to me that the Workshop is set up like a pressure cooker, with a rigid status system depending on publication....And those who haven't published usually feel pretty dismal" (133). This comment contradicts Paul Engle's notion of the Workshop as a kind of temporary refuge from the pressures of the publishing marketplace, suggesting that traditional Creative Writing pedagogy actually reproduces literary business.

Given that literary books and magazines have rarely been very profitable, however, why would publication bring such valuable status? Another former Workshop student, Jack Myers, explains that "because the rewards in both the workshop and literary scene are relatively so few, there was an intense competitive spirit underlying the life of the workshop." Myers is clear that

most of his fellow students “thrived in the excited literary environment,” but he also concedes that some students didn’t fare so well, some felt that “competition had no place in the life of an artist and their work and egos suffered under the severe pressure of trying to survive in this atmosphere” (133). Myers doesn’t define what the “rewards” are, but he points to a curious situation: although “so few” of these rewards are available, the intense competition for them implies that they nonetheless have enormous value among Workshop participants. Pierre Bourdieu argues that in the weird economy of literature, work that has no market value can nonetheless acquire “cultural capital,” and this concept might help explain the Workshop’s reward system. Creative Writing students don’t compete for market share in an economy of tangible goods, but they do compete for literary authority that thrives on the appearance of being uncommodifiable, a pure art experience beyond the impure business of popular bestsellers. So the rewards for creative writers are more likely to be immaterial, slippery, and amorphous categories like prestige, status, fame, acclaim—categories that will never be stable and therefore always vulnerable to attacks from competing literary authorities.

Even those who never felt personally assaulted within the traditional workshop method have frequently expressed misgivings about the general effects of that competitive environment. One might predict that individuals struggling for elite status within a group would strive to distinguish themselves as unique, but many commentators have argued that instead a kind of conformity pervades the group. Through Wilbers’s account, William Stafford reports about his experience in the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, the implicit competition to succeed tends to deprive students of “what is really essential...that is a willingness to fail, a willingness to try things, a relaxation to let your own life dominate your own writing. It’s almost inevitable that surrounded by successful people you will emulate them, you will choose their topics, you will follow their style, and I think it’s dangerous” (130). Stafford’s language is interesting here—he’s not just talking about the problem of conformity and lack of adventure, but also the problem of self-

loathing. The writer sketched here, without “willingness” or “relaxation,” appears to be too tightly wound and controlled, unforgiving of himself and some ideal aesthetic standard.

A variation on this theme of conformity is the criticism that Creative Writing students are often arrogant and resistant to change. Perhaps the most damning comment in the Wilbers’ selection comes from former student, Bruce Dobler, who was “dismayed by ‘the bickering of students, the constant biting and clawing.’” He goes on to illuminate how this petty antagonism arises:

I sensed that a great many students did not come to Iowa with an open spirit and a desire to apprentice themselves to journeymen writers. They came full of themselves (a charitable way to put it) and wanted to be appreciated for what they already knew. They were resistant to learning and teaching—self expressers for the most part who were only looking for uncritical love. Since they didn’t get it, they poured invective on their fellows in class....” (130).

Dobler here gets at another profound contradiction: while workshopers often crave “uncritical love,” they are quick to pour “invective on their fellows.” In other words, evaluative criticism is applied to those who often don’t take criticism well, and the result can be ugly and damaging.

Dobler gives a fascinating example from a class he took:

I remember a short story by Gail Goodwin, probably the best known of my peers at Iowa. It has a tramp in it who rapes an American librarian in London. The men in the class were tearing the story up, particularly critical of the tramp. Lucy Rosenthal, who is an editor with the Book-of-the-month-club-magazine (and who gave Gail a great review last month) said, “Well I thought the tramp *qua* tramp was *very* well drawn.” A male voice came back in imitation. “I thought the tramp *qua* tramp was shit *qua* shit (130).

What's even more astounding than the possibility that such a scene could really occur in a workshop is the possibility that the guy who attacked Goodwin and Rosenthal could very well have been celebrated by some of his colleagues for having the courage to be "honest." But even if we were able to determine objectively that a certain piece of writing was unsuccessful (and I do think that effective evaluation is possible and necessary in appropriate circumstances), why would telling the writer this in such harsh terms be considered honorable or effective as a teaching method?

Is the goal of a workshop to weed out the bad writers from the field so that only the excellent remain to take on elite status, and if so, are we really willing to trust that any workshop is able to make such determinations? Moreover, what are the potential damaging effects of making certain students elite, not just giving them praise but making them feel exceptional in relation to their peers? Why do a workshop and its students need to choose between "love" and "invective?" What if a workshop's goal were to help every student become more skilled and aware as a creative writer, and to let determinations of talent and genius happen elsewhere? Even if most of those students never go on to publish or win awards or secure a tenure-track professorship, is it possible to imagine other kinds of success than professional success?

Thirteen Ways of Making Violent Metaphors about the Workshop

- 1) "The qualities of a good Workshop teacher are rare: the prestige to attract students, an editorial sense that can foster a talent outside his or her taste and expertise, and a diplomacy that can keep student savagery from serious bloodletting. I recall the tell-it-like-it-is apprentice summarizing the worksheet of a shy classmate with, "But this is just shit, terrible shit." –John Leggett, Director, 1969-1987 (710)
- 2) "I remember hearing my highly alliterative short story, 'The Gorgeous Green of the Hedges,' gently demolished in my first workshop and, upon returning to my apartment,

eating bowl after bowl of mint-chip ice cream until the room spun.” –David Shields ’80
(711)

- 3) “Did I, we all wondered constantly about ourselves, have a future as a writer? For some it seemed the answer was obvious...but for the rest of us, struggling still to find a voice, it remained a torment. It was in our eyes as we sat back and listened to the others have a go at our manuscripts, it was in our greedy excitement as we set up appointments with the agents who had come to Iowa City to troll, it was in the gothic emotions of the night after fellowships for the following year had been awarded, a night of tears and violence, of overturned grave sites and wrecked pickup trucks. At Iowa, the question ruled.” –William Lashner ’91 (712)
- 4) “I was torn apart, eviscerated, expunged.... It was worse than I had expected, and my tender writer’s heart was broken.... What did I do?... I honed my sharpest phrases of censure. I practiced the witticisms of humiliation. Then one of the right stories came up for discussion and I went after it—a thundering beast from the Midwest aroused from hibernation to tear into flesh. How did I feel afterward? Pretty good.” –Bette Pesetsky ’59 (713-714).
- 5) “I loved going to the Writers’ Workshop, though I saw others mangled by the experience and often felt more than a little mauled myself. The Workshop is, or can be, a notoriously competitive place, and I took my share of licks. (I still remember a fellow student, an earnest and fretful young man from Oregon, slapping a story of mine down on a table top and announcing to the members of our workshop, ‘This is just pornography.’” –Michael Cunningham ’80 (714).
- 6) “In many ways, being at the Writers’ Workshop was like being in high school again. It was a cliquish, judgmental place, where your reputation could be decided in a moment.

You weren't judged on your hair and clothes, however, but on the contents of your bookshelf." –James Hynes '89 (720)

- 7) "Well, [my] story, of course, was trashed. Everyone hated it, and we went around and around the room with each person saying so. Then at the very end, the professor, a well-known writer, turned to me and in a sentence that seemed to take forever to enunciate, the meaning of which made no sense to me at the time, screamed red-in-the-face, 'AND IF YOU THINK...THAT BUTT-FUCKING...GIVES YOU SOME SORT...OF ENTRÉE...INTO MIDDLE-CLASS VALUES...YOU'RE WRONG!'" –Pete Hendley '91 (724)
- 8) "The workshops themselves could be stressful. The group was very bright and very opinionated and it's an understatement to say that there was no hand-holding." –Tom Barbash '91 (726)
- 9) "Iowa provides a chilling combination of vindication and indictment: it calls you by name, then takes you to task. It grants knowledge, then pokes at your kidneys. There's a lot of pressure, and not everyone comes away happy. But happiness is not the point." –Chris Hallman '91 (727)
- 10) "In a workshop with Frank Conroy a story I had written received some scathing criticism. He read my dialogue aloud, calling attention to its banal nature (it was indeed banal) and pointing out the number of extraneous details I'd used. In the two hours the workshop spent on my story, Frank lectured us on something he called 'Abject Naturalism.'

As I alternated between wanting to crawl under a table and wanting to turn it over on top of Frank, I felt pretty abject myself. The word conjured up a Victorian woodcut in which a father stands in a doorway, pointing a long, accusatory, and damning finger at a young girl hunched over a pregnant belly, shawl pulled across her weeping face." –Sands Hall '91 (728)

- 11) “Maybe it’s not strange that I found most workshops agonizing and—being combative and awkward anyhow—I had violent disagreements with many of my classmates about what mattered in a story. Or that I was able to define an aesthetic most often against my classmates’ stories. I spent most of those Tuesday afternoons scowling at the seminar table.” –Amy Charles ’95 (733)
- 12) “Like many people who earn an M.F.A., I left stung by so many encounters with teachers and their acolytes. Did workshops really need to be so brutal?” –Luke Wallin ’71 (736).
- 13) “[W]e did the Iowa thing, a combo of exchanging shortcuts and constructive criticism while slacking and backbiting.” –Miriam Kuznets ’88 (739)

The Melancholy of Fritz

I excerpted the thirteen passages above from testimonies gathered and published in a massive tome called *The Workshop: Seven Decades of the Iowa Writer’s Workshop (43 Stories, Recollections, & Essays on Iowa’s Place in Twentieth-Century American Literature)*, by Tom Grimes, a graduate of that program. Most of this volume is devoted to chronologically arranged short stories written by Iowa graduates who’ve gone on to publish successfully—including Flannery O’Conner, Raymond Carver, Denis Johnson, and Jane Smiley—and it is remarkable how many of these writers there are, and how influential they’ve been. The testimonies are presented in a 44-page section called “Recollections” that follows the main section of published stories like an appendix, and I find it fascinating that these testimonies were written mostly by former students who have *not* gone on to literary fame (with a few exceptions, like Michael Cunningham). By giving voice to some unknown former students, the “Recollections” provide a fuller, more accurate representation of the Workshop experience than only a few accounts from the superstars could. Of course, this representation is always filtered by time, imperfect memory,

biased perceptions, and intense emotions—so it’s not an objective, factual representation that these testimonies offer, but there’s much to glean from them nonetheless.

Many of the recollections exude a strong bittersweet flavor: on one hand, nostalgia for an intense, exciting, hopeful time; on the other hand, regret about not living up to the challenge, not being worthy of praise from peers and teachers, or resentment about being unfairly attacked. Not everyone describes the Iowa Workshop method with as much violent language and cynicism as in the thirteen passages I quoted above, but a similar kind of war story does arise with the same kind of dramatic tone with remarkable frequency. Is this the inevitable product of so many people who have a storytelling impulse but who may also carry a literary wound or sense of failure? Perhaps, but these accounts also generate a convincingly consistent profile of the traditional workshop method over the span of several decades, and that method clearly provoked a sense of competition and struggle among significant numbers of participants.

In one of these recollections, Fritz McDonald expresses poignant and profound sadness about his lost dreams from his time at Iowa. With courageous self-deprecation, he sketches himself as a pathetic second-rate dilettante clinging to Iowa City after his graduation “like the last guest at a party,” ghosting around campus and trying to expand “the one story that had earned a positive reaction from [his] classmates.” He describes a spiraling descent into an ugly mindset that had him enviously scouring bookstore shelves “for evidence of other graduates’ success,” eventually going broke and giving up on the failed novel.

The sweetness in all this bitterness comes only after he abandoned all this literary pretense and found a happy marriage. “What did I learn?” asks McDonald. “That life goes on, with or without fiction. I work for a marketing firm these days and write fiction when I can steal the minutes. Under trying circumstances, sentence by sentence, I progress. And this is as it should be. As the first act in my writing life, the Workshop allowed me to confront my most destructive habit—getting lost in the lifestyle and not in the work” (744). It’s noble of McDonald to take

personal responsibility for his “failure” as a writer, but doesn’t the Workshop itself also deserve some responsibility? McDonald’s sense of himself as a failure is largely determined by the lack of praise he received at Iowa and by his lack of subsequent publishing success, but what if McDonald had been taught at Iowa to practice as a writer without clinging so tightly to the goal of institutional or commercial success?

What I find especially bizarre about this recollection is that McDonald shows so much loyalty to the very ones who helped produce this despairing perspective in his mind:

On the long list of students who’ve attended the Workshop, many do not survive, their faith extinguished. Frank Conroy had said it over and over that ‘the writing life is a hard life,’ and I’d resented him for it. Now I owe him a debt of gratitude and think I understand him. How difficult it must be to pass judgment on so much hope. (744)

Here the famous teacher, Conroy, is somehow turned into a victim, burdened with that nasty task of having to “pass judgment on so much hope.” Years after his literary dream was “extinguished” in Iowa City, the only lesson that McDonald can extract is that he deserved to be extinguished after all. His problem was not that his teachers or his institution failed him but that he was too stubborn and deluded to recognize the harsh truth of the Workshop—that writing is indeed difficult, and most writers will fail. McDonald’s suggestion that passing judgment is the inevitable but unfortunate task of the teacher indicates how thoroughly the Creative Writing field has been subsumed by evaluative criticism. With the obsequious tone of a schoolboy who has been scolded and is now saying what the headmaster wants him to say, McDonald’s closing statement shows how difficult it is for participants in Creative Writing to conceive of any pedagogy that doesn’t involve passing judgment, even those who have had their faith extinguished.

As a parenthetical note, McDonald says he works “for a marketing firm these days,” and this seemingly inconsequential detail deserves some attention. He frames his literary work as an entirely separate realm from his marketing work; in fact the little literary work he does requires that he “steal the minutes” in order to get it done. Is it possible, however, that McDonald’s literary work, at Iowa and beyond, provided him with important training for marketing? Does his ability to tell a story and develop a character, even if not on par with Raymond Carver, make him more skilled in creating advertising campaigns or brand identities? If McDonald really was “lost in the lifestyle and not in the work,” did this make him more likely to end up in a lifestyle industry like marketing? How many of those graduates of the Workshop who had “their faith extinguished” went on to find employment in the post-industrial creative economy? Certainly the vast majority of MFA graduates do not go on to successful careers in the Creative Writing field. Are many of them following a path similar to McDonald’s? What’s the relationship between that experience in Creative Writing and what comes after? How do the skills learned in Creative Writing, including the workshop method, translate into socioeconomic value across a wide range of practices and jobs?

In any case, for all those who don’t become literary superstars, it’s curious that there can be strong motivation to defend the purity of literary work. As one of the many wounded veterans of a difficult war, McDonald may not have received heroic medals or risen to the ranks of general, but he can still cling to his war stories and replay in his mind what-might-have-been.

The No of the Workshop

Tom Grimes is able to call his book *The Workshop* because the Iowa Creative Writing program has become so widely recognized as the most historically significant and influential program in the country. It’s not just *any* workshop, it’s *the* (capital W) Workshop. Despite this elite positioning, Grimes also tries to frame the Workshop as an anti-elitist force in his

introductory essay, "Workshop and the Writing Life." Sketching a brief historical and theoretical background for the Creative Writing field, he argues that the Workshop emerged as a demystifying and democratizing correction to Romantic elitism and its fetishization of exceptional talent (2). Grimes also connects the origins of Creative Writing to the rise of New Criticism and its dominant method of "close reading," which primarily examines a literary text's techniques rather than the author's biography. His argument becomes particularly ambitious when he makes a further claim that this attention to text by both Creative Writing and New Criticism actually "announced the death of the author...four decades ahead of French literary theorist Roland Barthes" (3).

This sounds like groundbreaking news, but what Grimes forgets is that despite its disregard of the author's personal life, New Criticism is fiercely devoted to the author's place in the canon, his literary value in relation to the value of other authors. He also misunderstands Barthes's concept as a mean-spirited attempt to kill authors with harsh aesthetic criticism; the concept actually refers to how the literary writer is not so much a free agent making aesthetic choices as someone whose choices are largely determined by social and historical circumstances. If Creative Writing and New Criticism encourage harsh evaluation of authors, they actually privilege the author and affirm the elitist tendencies of the Romantic project by insisting on a hierarchy of aesthetic winners and losers. Nonetheless, Grimes argues,

When a student enters a Workshop seminar room, any hope of being rescued by the abstractions of theory vanishes the moment discussion begins. If we arrive not believing in the death of the author, we often crawl away several hours later wishing for it. What's established instantly is the fact that Romanticism's deification of the writer is the single most idiotic aberration in the history of literature. (5)

It's tempting to imagine Barthes eavesdropping on a Creative Writing workshop with a look of satisfaction at all these aspiring authors killing each other. His pleasure, however, would derive not from witnessing "the death of the author" in practice but rather from witnessing the latest ugly trainwreck of the ongoing Romantic project from which the wounded "crawl away" on their hands and knees.

Grimes then makes another remarkable theoretical leap, comparing the Workshop's pedagogical focus on "what not to do" with the Eastern philosophical concept he calls "Zen surrender" (8). Less experienced writers come to Iowa with too much ego, fantasies of instant literary stardom, but the Workshop quickly and decisively dismantles that oversized desire and forces them to surrender their claim on talent and genius. Grimes offers a detailed description of how this ego-crushing can happen in the classroom:

The line edits that pick apart the imagined integrity of your story before the end of the first sentence. The declaration by others of utter mystification when it came to being able to say what your story was about. The lancing comparisons of your pale imitation to the work of obviously influential masters. The subtle and not so subtle assassinations of character that, even though directed at your fictional understudies, carry their sting back to their original flesh-and-blood source. Charges of sexism, misogyny, elitist tendencies. Too many metaphors! Too passive a protagonist. You read the word "Congratulations" on one of the written commentaries you receive, and your heart hums. Then you read the rest of the accolade—"you've created the most despicable narrator in American literature!" (8)

All this negative critique Grimes calls "the No of the Workshop," the unyielding attention to how a writer is failing and what stories and poems are doing poorly. Just as Grimes mistakenly conflates "the death of the author" and harsh criticism, so too he conflates character

assassinations and the non-attachment taught by Zen Buddhism. While many serious spiritual practices require humility, rigor, and a challenging devotion to traditional teachings, they don't often encourage practitioners to humiliate and pass judgment against each other.

As many former students have testified, the Iowa Writers' Workshop fetishizes talent and a reward system of publication and critical acclaim. Unless the entire system of literary winners and losers is transformed, telling individual students that their writing is bad does not rid them of the desire to achieve the goal of literary glory—it just makes them feel dejected. They're still taking failure personally, and if they're given praise, they take that success personally. A Creative Writing classroom can encourage a reverence for tradition, standards, skills, and even certain forms of criticism, without putting a student's self-esteem on the line, without pitting students against each other in a contest for literary status. I'm not suggesting that Creative Writing teachers replace the "No" with the "Yes," that is, the classroom that coddles every student and showers praise indiscriminately. Instead, the classroom can re-orient attention away from both positive and negative evaluation toward an ongoing practice that doesn't attach itself to an ultimate standard of greatness.

Grimes's concept of the "No" echoes the claim made by many commentators that Creative Writing can't be taught. By reducing any positive pedagogical program to triteness, he can be proud that the Workshop "has offered no prescriptions for 'fixing' stories, no formulas for creating characters, no blueprint for surefire plotting" (8). Other commentators have argued precisely the opposite—that the workshop's insistence on suggesting improvements (often in the wake of negative criticism) does indeed encourage students to conform to each other's easy formulas. In any case, says Grimes, even though the Workshop "provides no direct help," (10) it does help the writer build empathy and relationships with readers, and this helps the writer find some useful distance from what she writes: "Through your classmates, you learn to hear, if not necessarily heed, all criticisms. You learn objectivity, not creativity. Once you've surrendered all

your previous illusions, this is what the Workshop finally teaches—objectivity” (12). It may be true enough that repeated criticism helps the writer be less personally attached to his writing, but at what cost? How long will the process take, and is there a more efficient and efficacious way to gain this objectivity? What’s the value of insisting that the Workshop gives students “no direct help”—that Creative Writing can’t be taught? What if students *can* be taught to write creatively through a carefully planned program of exercises, assignments, reading, and other activities that allows them to access a wide range of skills and awareness? What if teachers *can* teach, rather than simply managing the flow of workshop criticism?

The Time to Write, and a Solid Alibi

I have been criticizing the traditional workshop method’s dependence on criticism, and I suppose you could accuse me of being a hypocrite. I should stress again that I think Creative Writing programs provide remarkable benefits to writers, and they’ve enriched the English discipline enormously. The workshop method is only one piece of the overall Creative Writing experience, particularly at the graduate level, and there are many other aspects of these programs that are useful, supportive, and necessary in a larger cultural climate that treats the arts as if they were an extracurricular afterthought. Among the most obvious and widely recognized benefits of being a Creative Writing student is time—time away from a full-time job, time to devote to writing and reading, time to invest in a practice that need not result in a product with immediate commercial value.

Where does this time come from? Some observers talk about it as if it were spontaneously generated, through magic or alchemy, but even time in the Creative Writing field has social and economic value, and someone is ultimately paying for it. Most undergraduate students pay tuition for that time, and because these courses at the undergraduate level are

extremely popular, they generate substantial tuition revenues. Some graduate students pay tuition in exchange for that time, but many graduate students are given tuition waivers and even stipends, often in exchange for teaching undergraduate courses, sometimes through fellowships. So this graduate student time is often supported indirectly by undergraduate tuition. Like other academic enterprises, Creative Writing programs are also supplemented by taxes and endowments, and receiving this kind of support means that the institution values these programs enough to invest in them. Whatever the arrangement, educational consumers and institutions are both willing to pay for the time provided to write and read; it's not irrationally made possible by the muses or a kindhearted academy. Nonetheless, it's newsworthy that Creative Writing does have the institutional power to provide so much time to students, and anyone who can gain access to this time can benefit enormously from it.

In my senior year as an undergraduate, I took one workshop per semester, and this allowed me to devote to writing whatever time I might have spent taking another course to fulfill my graduation requirements. I found this arrangement very appealing, but something else began to happen to my sense of time, beyond a simple exchange of a few hours of rote drudgery for creative fun. Until that point in my life, time seemed to me like a vast boredom that needed to be filled with something stimulating or entertaining, and TV was usually the easiest filler available. When I started writing poems, however, time quite quickly became an opportunity to listen, to observe, to think, to play with language and make poems. I was twenty years old, and suddenly, thanks largely to the poetry writing course I'd signed up for, what used to seem like boredom became potential material for poetry, and time seemed to be radiant and generous rather than a burden. In this way—I'm willing to say—Creative Writing saved my life, or at least it helped me to appreciate time in an entirely new and enriching way.

I soon went on to an MFA program, and there accessed even more time to write, in exchange for teaching courses to undergraduates. This was an amazing several years of my life,

and I look back on it with great fondness. I was able to devote a significant portion of almost every day to writing and reading, talking about poetry with fellow students in the program, haunting used bookstores for new finds, and daydreaming. Although workshop meetings did help determine my writing life in general—by anticipating evaluation by peers, for example—I spent only a tiny percentage of my overall time (three hours per week) in that physical workshop space. The beautifully drifting existence that I was able to live while an MFA student had a unique quality of security and stability about it, even though I knew it would be temporary. I didn't just have time to write; I had time that was officially sanctioned by an institution of higher education, and that means my creative practice had legitimacy. If I had decided to spend all this time writing poetry without entering a Creative Writing program, not only would I have had to go into greater debt (lacking the income of a full-time job), it would have been much more challenging to explain to myself and others what I was *doing* with my time. Although writing poetry may have involved a similar process whether inside or outside the Creative Writing program, on the inside that doing is made legitimate because it occurs in an institutional context and leads to a graduate degree from a university.

Former Iowa student Bruce Dobler explains that his time there gave him permission to approach his writing as “a full-time commitment” rather than just a “part-time...hobby” (Wilbers 128). This shift was not only due to a schedule change but a change in perception:

And, really doesn't a writer in our society need that built-in excuse, for himself and for others? Suppose I had announced to friends, family, in-laws that I was going to sit back and write for two or three years while my wife worked full-time and we borrowed whatever else we needed to get by. I could have done that—but at what cost. So instead...all the family and friends thought it was just great. Bruce went back to get a graduate degree. I know this sounds simpleminded, but when you come right down to it, I can't think of a better way to put a good face

on dropping out to just write for a few years. Especially for someone from a working class family. So that was one big thing the Workshop did. It provided the setting for commitment to writing and a solid alibi for the world. (129)

Without the alibi of working on an officially sanctioned educational degree, Dobler suggests, those who write creatively will be accused of committing crimes against social values. Those purists who argue that poets and fiction writers should be completely independent agents and live in poverty—live in “the real world” so they’ll have real material to write about—perpetuate a Romantic fantasy about the mysterious pain necessary to make art and be a genius. If Dobler’s comments “sounds simpleminded,” that’s because it provides some clarity that few commentators are willing to acknowledge, clarity about why so many people are interested in being Creative Writing students.

Another former Iowa student, Constance Urdang, provides a similarly frank account of her experience:

What I value the Iowa Workshop for is the time it gave me to write. The opportunity to do my own work in my own way. The coming together of a number of writers and would-be writers in one place. The people to talk to about writing, and about what and where and when to “send out.” None of this took place in the weekly meeting—many people never went to those, anyway; but without the Workshop none of it would or could have happened. (127)

Urdang here makes a strong distinction between the valuable time provided within the general Workshop environment and the specific Creative Writing courses the program offered, which she nearly dismisses as useless. Consider the implications of what she says: the benefit of an academic program is not found in its academic courses. If Urdang is right, even partially right, is this bizarre situation simply the inevitable result of trying to teach what can’t be taught? Or can those courses be changed so that they do actually provide an educational benefit to students?

Urdang betrays some cynicism about “the weekly meeting,” but even those former students who see it as more benign can be dismissive about it. Lewis Turco makes a spirited defense of the Iowa Workshop against charges that it’s too competitive or that it churns out mediocrity, but he also suggests that workshop meetings themselves are not really relevant because “Iowa is essentially an unacademic place. Most of the learning process takes place not in the classroom but in the private bull session at the Union or at the local bars; in the library and bookstores where students introduce themselves and each other to all kinds of writing, from the avant-garde to the conservative” (71). Turco proclaims Iowa an “unacademic” place with some pride in his voice, perhaps wanting to dissociate it from the more pejorative, nerdy connotations of that term. But it’s startling that he can admit so easily that “the learning process takes place not in the classroom.” Those commentators who argue that literary writing can’t be taught might say that the traditional workshop method is the least intrusive pedagogical strategy available—it may not be perfect, but it’s better than reducing great writing to textbook formulas and standards. This attitude, however, precludes the possibility that many other pedagogical strategies can exist, strategies that offer guidance without being prescriptive.

The Community of Readers

Turco’s comment calls attention to another enormous benefit of participation in a Creative Writing program: a kind of informal training for literary reading, something that can be very difficult to acquire otherwise. Having come into the program without much experience as a literary reader, I benefited enormously from the book recommendations given by teachers and fellow students. Before launching into our standard workshopping routine, one of my teachers used to begin each class meeting with a brief reading of some published (often dead) writer he wanted to turn us on to, usually someone that we may have overlooked or not encountered yet. Once he began by mentioning Neruda’s well-deserved international fame as a poet, then

suggested that there's another Spanish-language poet who has received far less attention but is equally deserving. He then read a couple of poems by that poet—Cesar Vallejo—and I'll always remember how the amazing, magical sound of Vallejo's words filled that hushed room, and ever since then I've felt a kinship with that poetry. On another occasion this teacher read a handful of Plath's funniest and most playful passages, reminding us that she's not always the serious drama queen that we find in anthology standards like "Daddy." These little informal readings were this teacher's most overt attempts to teach, and they were also the most useful parts of those classes.

I also received reading tips from my peers in the program, and the countless conversations we had about what we were reading became a valuable extracurricular literary education that would have been much harder to receive without that institutional context to give us a common purpose and sense of community. My fellow students and I were more likely to talk about our favorite books or literary magazines than about each other's poetry, and this tendency was partly due, I think, to a kind of exhaustion with the workshopping we had to slog through in classes. Lunch with a fellow writer probably couldn't accommodate comments like, "Hey, I think your recent poems have been too sentimental." But I had many lunch conversations that included comments like, "Hey, you should read Frank Stanford's books—they're mostly out-of-print, but I'll photocopy some of my favorite poems and put them in your mailbox." The more of these conversations I had, the longer my list of books-to-read grew, and I started to develop a rich sense of where contemporary American poetry had come from, and how my own poetry fit into a complex network of traditions and divergences.

My education as a reader in the context of a Creative Writing program involved more than simply acquiring tips about good authors and books. The traditional workshop method that I practiced for several years was really a mode of reading rather than writing, and although I've been emphasizing particularly the evaluative orientation of that reading, it certainly involves much more complexity and skill than saying, "I like your poem/I don't like your poem." As an

undergraduate and graduate student I helped to workshop perhaps several hundred poems written and submitted by fellow students, and this means that I repeatedly practiced a process of close reading, examining each line, each word, looking for formal patterns, connections between images and sounds, tracing tonal consistencies and inconsistencies, studying the texture of language. Over time, I improved this analytical reading ability substantially. I learned to locate a poem's center of gravity quickly, to understand what it was doing and what it was trying to do.

One of my teachers would mark up the student poem and transform it into a kind of exploded-view diagram, drawing lines between key phrases and images, blocking off certain passages and asking questions about them, identifying patterns in diction and grammar. Seeing what this teacher could do to a poem again and again taught me how serious investigation of a literary work can reveal a whole world of devices and effects that don't seem to be visible at first. This lesson was particularly valuable when reading a piece that appeared to be self-evident and realistic; I began to understand that all writing is artifice, and that even a sense of realism or honesty is an effect produced by the text. I learned that writers are not mirrors or special sources of truth, but people who produce effects through language. Another teacher had us doing "cold readings" in class, meaning that we didn't have the poems in advance to prepare our comments—we just dove into our workshopping. While this extemporaneous discussion could be messy and disorienting, we also were forced to become better at it, to focus our minds quickly and communicate something intelligent and useful. I still bring these skills to every poem I read, including my own, and there's no doubt that any ability I have to read in a technical, writerly way benefited hugely from this early workshopping practice.

This intensive training as a close reader, however, did not occur in a vacuum. Almost always it was subordinated to the workshop method's primary goal of evaluation; almost always our understanding of how a poem works lead us to a judgments about the poem's merit. The poem is not just doing—I was taught—it is also succeeding or failing. Among the most important

components of a reformed Creative Writing pedagogy could be a delinking of close reading from the evaluative impulse. As a method most famously associated with New Criticism, close reading is often bashed as a simpleminded strategy for shoring up the hierarchies of the literary canon. But scrutinizing a text's formal elements can serve many other purposes besides supporting claims of aesthetic value.

When I teach survey courses in Literary Studies, I ask my students to avoid using evaluative language when they respond to our reading assignments in discussion or writing, and I think the result is a much richer kind of thinking. Before making this pedagogical shift, I found that particularly when encountering more difficult work by authors like Gertrude Stein or John Ashbery, students were eager to wield their critical authority against it, dismissing it as bad or boring, and therefore not worth a serious reading effort. But when I take the option of making aesthetic judgments away entirely, they're forced to reckon with what the text is doing. They have to ask, why does this text seem difficult or abrasive or confusing to me? What's this text doing if not trying to entertain me with realistic narratives and an overt sense of closure? This same kind of non-evaluative inquiry is possible in the Creative Writing classroom.

From Readers' Workshop to Writers' Workshop

Paul Dawson—whose full-length study, *Creative Writing and The New Humanities*, is among the most ambitious and convincing attempts to give Creative Writing a theoretical framework—agrees that reconceiving the reading strategies of the traditional workshop can substantially improve the learning experience of students. Although Dawson largely supports the traditional Creative Writing model, he does propose a more socially-engaged method of reading in the workshop, and this proposal is built upon his muted critique of the field's standard approach to texts:

While Creative Writing is not necessarily founded on a concept of the literary as a site of withdrawal from politics and society, this is nonetheless implicit in the workshop process because its main function is to establish a standard of literary value by which to identify what “works” in exemplary texts and to apply these principles to the aesthetic improvement of student manuscripts. (184)

This is a cogent summary of how a focus on aesthetic excellence has led Creative Writing to perceive itself as socially isolated, to be operating on a plane of “aesthetic autonomy” (184), true to its New Critical lineage. Dawson sees this bid for autonomy as harmful to the field, and he proposes a reformed workshop in which “each student manuscript is not only afforded a remedial technical overhauling...but is placed within a broader cultural or political context.”

Realizing this change “requires shifting the pedagogical focus of the workshop from narrowly formalist conceptions of craft to the social context of literature” (208). What Dawson advocates here is a new method of reading that he calls “sociological poetics.” This poetics recognizes “that aesthetic or craft-based decisions of a writer are always the result (consciously or otherwise) of ideological or political choice”; rather than simply judging a literary work’s aesthetic strength, a workshop pedagogy can conceive of craft “as a conscious and deliberate intervention in the social life of a discourse” (211). A pedagogical shift in the classroom toward this sociological poetics, Dawson suggests, would reverberate at the institutional level by giving creative writers a new way to “claim intellectual authority within the academy...by exploring the political and discursive effects of their literary products and accepting responsibility for them” (214).

Throughout *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, Dawson strikes a compromising tone, willing to embrace Creative Writing’s strengths and relevance, but also urging the field to reform in practical, measured steps. His approach is refreshing in the wake of so much polemical posturing from both defenders and detractors of the field, and I find his proposal for a new

workshop poetics convincing and useful. I would add, however, that the workshop needs to become a site not only for practicing *reading* skills, but also *writing* skills. Among Dawson's foundational points is that the Creative Writing classroom has really always been more of a readers' workshop, despite its common title of "writers' workshop."

A chapter devoted entirely to studying what happens in the workshop begins with an explicit claim: "the pedagogical practice of the workshop is fundamentally one of critical reading. In other words, what enables the writing workshop to function is not a theory of writing, but a theory of reading.... How a work is *composed* by the student is not as important as how it can be *read*..." (88). This emphasis on reading practice is bound up in Dawson's view that Creative Writing has been shaped significantly by its relationship with Literary Studies, a relationship that has grown too adversarial and needs to reclaim a common mission of reading texts. Dawson tries to broker a compromise between two poles—the anti-humanist theory-oriented wing of Literary Studies and Creative Writing's humanists who appreciate literature for its own sake—and for him this détente requires collaborating on a theory of reading that's both intellectually engaged and appealing to a broader swath of the public.

While I agree that developing a new poetics for the workshop is important for Creative Writing, I think the field also needs to develop theories of writing. The emphasis on reading student work means that the workshop is always approaching texts after they've been produced; what's missing is careful, formal attention to *the conditions and modes of literary production*. Dawson himself claims that the traditional workshop method is process oriented, and in doing so perpetuates a pervasive confusion. In the first chapter of his book, as he surveys the historical conditions that contributed to the rise of Creative Writing, he says:

Creative Writing, I suggest, offered an alternative to the word "literature" in the sense that it emphasizes process rather than product. Thus the logic behind studying Creative Writing as opposed to studying literature does not have to be

that one writes as opposed to reads, nor that one produces a creative fiction rather than a non-creative essay. The object of study in a Creative Writing class, whether it be a published work of literature or a student manuscript, is scrutinized in terms of the process of its making, rather than as a literary artifact. That is, the distinction is not between what students produce, but what they study: text as process rather than text as product. (38)

Of course it's true that in Literary Studies students might be encouraged to analyze "meaning"—the psychological, social, or ethical implications of a text—whereas in Creative Writing students analyze "craft"—the techniques that generate its literary effects. But this difference is not equal to the difference between product and process. In short, talking about craft is not the same as practicing a writing process.

Workshop participants can examine and discuss how Walt Whitman or one of their own fellow students use parataxis in their sentence structure, and how this technique generates a loose, inclusive tone, but this does not mean that those participants have actually practiced parataxis in their own writing. There are many ways that a teacher can create conditions for this kind of practice, from an in-class exercise to a formal writing assignment; otherwise this technique may never enter the student's process, unless he feels some motivation to practice it on his own. Reading technique or craft can certainly be an important component of a Creative Writing education, but it should be complemented by actual writing instruction, and this means that the field needs to accept that literary writing can actually be taught. It's curious how for over half a century Creative Writing teachers and administrators have argued that one cannot be taught to write poems and stories, one can only receive response to what one has already written and learn whatever lessons are available from that response. Students of visual art may also engage in group critiques of their work, but aren't they also guided through a practice in the studio, don't

they also receive practical, technical instruction about how to mix color or how to develop a print?

When we say that writing can't be taught, what we really mean is that *talent* can't be taught. Talent, of course, is supposed to be a gift from the muses or God or some other higher power, and therefore it cannot be the product of mere instruction. Traditional workshop discussions treat craft not as a neutral category, but as a demonstration of talent. The craft on the bottom rungs of the talent hierarchy is dismissed, and the craft at the top is celebrated, but even the exemplary craft cannot be taught because its association with talent mystifies it, transforms it into something that just happens, if you're lucky. What the workshop method practices, finally, is how to identify with critical authority those literary products that were created by talent, and those that lacked the benefit of talent. The craft discussions of Creative Writing, then, are no less product-oriented than the textual analysis of Literary Studies, because that attention to technique tends to be oriented toward evaluation and competing notions of excellence.

Francine Prose's Workshop From Hell

I haven't come across a more cynical, caustic portrait of the traditional writers' workshop than the one in Francine Prose's 2000 novel, *Blue Angel*. The book tells the story of Ted Swenson—a married middle-aged Creative Writing professor at a mediocre private New England college—who dreads his students and the whole idea of leading a workshop full of untalented, backbiting, self-important hacks. When he finally finds a student who shows some promise, his professional enthusiasm spills into romantic lust, and he ends up having an inappropriate relationship with this much younger woman, and the consequences turn out to be disastrous.

Filling in much of the space around this core storyline are satirical sketches of Swenson's workshop meetings that are both painful and hilarious. There's a slightly cartoonish quality to these proceedings, suggesting that Prose has exaggerated her own experiences in workshops for

comic effect; in an interview she admits that this “writing class from hell” is the “worst-case scenario. Some of those students were based on students I had—but from over many years.” Prose fictionalizes in the novel, of course, but it’s clear that she intends her depiction of Swenson’s workshop to be a critique of writing classes in general. In that same interview she says, “there’s something essentially sadistic about the whole process. I mean, to sit there and have the love of your life—your work—something that close to your heart and soul, just ripped apart by strangers” (*Reading Like* 15).

The novel spreads blame for the hellish workshop to all participants, the students as well as the hapless teacher; moreover, we learn early on that “no one wants to be here” (*Blue* 5). Throughout the book there’s an excruciating sense that everyone is trapped, everyone contributes to this educational trainwreck, but no one, least of all Swenson, knows how to change things for the better. Nothing can save them except that the class meets only a few hours per week, so Swenson can regularly feel “like an innocent man, sentenced to life, whose jail term has just been commuted” (13). Although the novel pokes fun at Swenson’s martyrdom, it does want us to feel some sympathy for his predicament, and it’s generally less kind to the students, who are often portrayed as petty, competitive, retaliatory brats who care much more about winning some slice of workshop limelight than becoming better creative writers.

From his passive perch, Swenson expresses disdain for how unwilling his students are to be honest and direct in their critiques. The result of this flabby equivocation is “the gruelingly tactful discussion” (185) that’s too frightened of confrontation to say that crap is crap. This softer side of the writing class’s disease provokes at least two surgery metaphors in Swenson’s consciousness. At one point he congratulates himself for making a “slashing incision that’s transcended the timid microsurgery of the workshop” (11); on another occasion, he sarcastically notes to himself that his students have “performed the weekly miracle of healing the terminally ill with minor cosmetic surgery” (55). The suggestion here is that well-intentioned students

attempting to repair the bad health of their peers' writing end up infecting the whole literary environment with safe, small-minded comments that fail to revere the awesome, hard-won force of great art.

From within this fog of the workshop's softer side, the harder side inevitably leaps, violently destroying any self-esteem that hasn't already been eroded away. In the classroom scenes of *Blue Angel*, that boring, inept surgery is routinely interrupted by vicious battles between students, and it's notable how often these scenes are described with metaphors of physical brutality, as if a cheap horror motif were seeping into this academic novel. At the end of one class Swenson finally feels relief from his feckless desire to protect a brutalized student "from the class's blood lust" (116), and moments later, lingering in the room to chat with his student-paramour, Angela, he confides, "I thought they'd tear poor Carlos limb from limb and feast on his bleeding carcass" (117). On another occasion, it's Angela herself who attacks another student's writing, saying, "*nothing's* in this story but your stupid ideas," and Swenson has no ability to prevent "this prosecutorial lunge for the throat, this reckless bloodletting. He should be wading into the fray, yanking back on Angela's leash, rescuing poor Meg, but he can only watch, mesmerized" (184).

This bloodletting, Prose emphasizes, does not occur in isolation, but in a complex system of maneuvers to seize workshop authority. One of the most salient features of Swenson's workshop, then, is the tendency for students to seek revenge. In other words, those who are attacked in turn attack their attackers, generating a continuing cycle of antagonism that ignores the actual piece of writing under discussion. Everyone in the room can smell which direction the next strike will come from, even the absentminded commander-in-chief: "when Swenson can't remember what happened in class last week, he looks to see which student seems most wounded or aggrieved and tracks that information back to whose story they demolished" (111). A week after Angela crushed Meg's story, Swenson enters the room and thinks, "It's payback time.

That's how the system works, except in the rare cases of unusually generous, honest, or masochistic students who can get their hearts ripped out and the next week praise their attacker. But no one's that selfless in this class" (200). The system has its own predictable logic, and everyone implicitly agrees to its terms and takes on a role in the drama. Echoing Bourdieu's notion of "position-taking"—the battle for cultural capital within fields that claim to be outside the marketplace—Prose notes that everyone in the workshop "is attentive to the infinitesimal shifts of status and position" (113).

No one seems able to step outside of the system and change it, but unfortunately for Swenson, that's not because he isn't acutely aware of how insane it is. In the novel's most damning passage, he thinks: "What maniac invented this torture, this punishment for young writers? Imagine a group of established authors subjecting themselves to this! It's not an academic discipline, it's fraternity hazing. And the most appalling part is that its supposed to be helpful. The bound and gagged sacrificial lamb is supposed to be grateful" (199). A moment of partial clarity, at least, this passage bluntly names a core contradiction of the workshop method. What intends to be a helpful pedagogical strategy turns out to be a sadistic nightmare that encourages students to be either powerless victims or to inflict desperate punishments, like adolescent-minded frat-boys.

Lesson from Hell

What can we learn from Swenson and the workshop from hell? Swenson himself thinks he has learned some lessons, although he realizes them too late. In the final pathetic gasps of his sexual harassment hearing, after someone suggests that he has given preferential treatment to Angela, he thinks to himself "that the real unfairness involves the distribution of talent and has nothing to do with whatever happened between him and Angela Argo" (285). In other words, the problem with workshops is that some students have talent and others don't, yet everyone wants to

be treated as if they were talented. Moreover, every student believes that it's his or her politically correct and self-evident right to be praised, so the ultimate lesson Swenson claims is that he will "never criticize another student" (291). His bitterness on the verge of being terminated by this institutional committee sounds like a familiar gripe against overly sensitive, entitled students in the age of consumerized higher education. Students have become so coddled and insolent, he concludes, that identifying real talent and criticizing the imposters is no longer possible. The only way to save your job is to reject your allegiance to great art and give the spoiled students whatever they want.

Are Swenson's lessons the ones that Prose would like us to carry away from *Blue Angel*? Most novels don't offer such easy equations, of course, but they do often encourage us to feel certain sympathies or antipathies, and Prose generates a complex, ambivalent relationship between readers and this embattled professor. We sympathize with him to some degree, and it's hard not to be partly convinced by his cynicism, but there's no doubt that we also view him as a deluded sap, a victim of his own stupidity, crippled by fears of being washed up after having been a once-promising literary figure. Prose does say explicitly in another interview, "The only thing I really have in common with Swenson is his over-identification with the students in his class" (*Chronicle* 10); this suggests that she and her novel don't necessarily concur with his tenuous conclusions. Nonetheless, I think there's a danger that readers looking to make a certain cynical, conservative argument against the Creative Writing field can use Swenson as support to say, "see, it's true, Creative Writing *has* turned its back on great literature, Creative Writing *is* just a forum for egocentric students to express themselves without regard to tradition or excellence."

This is the kind of argument that D.G. Myers makes in *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*. Myers positions his discussion of *Blue Angel* prominently in the final pages of his afterword, which is new to the 2nd edition—so it appears that he finds the text somehow representative of Creative Writing history. Rather than perceiving Swenson as a problematic

figure, however, Myers harnesses this fictional professor's perspective to point out the inevitable failings of Creative Writing. Simply put, the trouble with Creative Writing is that it no longer has the ability to make sound artistic evaluations. For Myers, *Blue Angel* demonstrates that “genuinely original writing causes even the experienced teacher and critic to suffer a reversal, desperately seeking affirmation for literary judgment that is no longer sure of itself” (178). It's hard to see how Myers comes to this conclusion, given that much of the novel depicts fierce workshop battles in which students quite confidently assert their literary judgments, but perhaps like Swenson, what he means is that the *correct* judgments are the ones that have lost their sure footing.

Taking a broader view, Myers poses the “dilemma” this way:

Since the writer's workshop presupposes the rejection of any but intrinsic criteria—the judgment whether a literary text stands or falls according to the laws of its own being—and since literary theory has, over the past two-and-a-half decades, succeeded in putting all evaluative criteria under suspicion, how are the creative writing teacher's own evaluative criteria to survive public exposure?

(177)

The only way to get out of this bind, would be “by breaking out of this system altogether,” not by rejecting evaluation but by returning it to a traditional ground of humanism and universal truths: “Creative writing might offer another kind of knowledge, teaching how the strongest stories construct human possibility, but to do so it would have to abandon subjective satisfaction as the sole measure of creative accomplishment and begin to answer to objective facts outside the self, where other people might possibly live” (179). What Myers does here is assume that Creative Writing's goal should be to “measure...creative accomplishment,” and then try to reorient us from a shaky, subjective mode to a more stable, objective mode of doing this. But why should aesthetic evaluation be the workshop's primary method or goal in the first place? Is it not possible

to imagine a Creative Writing workshop that suspends literary judgment and instead teaches students how to engage in a versatile and rigorous writing practice?

Swenson's workshops are noteworthy for their failures, and it's clear that both professor and students are equally damaged by the senseless "fraternity hazing." What's really remarkable, however, is that it never occurs to Swenson to create an alternative method for the writers' workshop. Even while wondering "what maniac invented this torture," he never imagines another way, as if he were required by his institution, or by some maniacal and unbreakable Creative Writing tradition, to perpetuate this regime of torture. We can only speculate if Prose herself can imagine an alternative method for the classroom, but what she says in the interviews I cited above suggests that she does not, preferring now to avoid teaching Creative Writing workshops altogether.

I recently heard a story about a veteran Creative Writing teacher who graduated from Iowa during its mid-century glory days. He's in the twilight of his teaching career now, and he has taught many, many workshops over the span of almost four decades. Recently he went to see the chair of his English department and confessed that he doesn't think he can teach another workshop—after all these years he's just burned out on them. He was hoping the chair would allow him to teach some other kinds of courses. In response, the chair asked, "Why not just teach your workshops in a different way?"

It's a peculiar kind of pedagogical paralysis that this real Iowa veteran and the fictional Swenson experience. The teacher envisions only two options: continue to oversee a torture chamber, or reject teaching and this academic field entirely. Myers too is quite cynical about the possibility of reforming Creative Writing, seeing it as so thoroughly determined by its flimsy subjective values. Nonetheless, there's that longshot possibility of "breaking out of this system" by rejecting the subjective for the objective. Does this mean, using Prose's terms, that Myers would have us keep the "torture," but give its punitive methods a more objective, universal

foundation to stand on. Perhaps the “system” to change is not the evaluation’s subjectivity but evaluation in general. Any teacher can simply choose to remove that element of torture from the classroom and replace it with more effective methods. It may be true that you can’t teach talent, but you can teach students to develop a writing practice, and an awareness of that practice.

Free Market Workshop

The traditional writers’ workshop has been defended as a democratic space because students are “free” to produce their work without constraints imposed from above, and to participate equally in evaluative critiques. Students are usually given no specific assignments, guidelines, parameters, or models for their poems and stories, and they can voice their literary opinions just like the teacher, so authority in the workshop appears to be leveled.

This image of democracy, however, can conceal a hard “free market” style of workshopping that engenders competition and an undemocratic hierarchy of authority. For several decades in the U.S., consensus opinion has come to equate political and social freedom with deregulation, free trade, lower taxes, the dismantling of government social services, and consumer individualism, but of course it’s also valid to conceive a democratic system that imposes more controls on the free market, that redistributes wealth more equitably, and encourages public responsibility rather than only profitability. The traditional workshop, I argue, operates as a kind of free market of aesthetic or academic value, an unfettered competition in which everyone acts as self-interested individuals who define their success and failure in opposition to other members of the group. What many called a communal environment may more accurately be called “the level-playing field” that is celebrated by free-marketeers.

I propose an different model of democracy for Creative Writing, a reorientation from consumer individualism to a more structured learning space that encourages a collective, collaborative, ongoing practice. This shift requires more attention to the social conditions of creative literacy, and more

pedagogical structure to give students diverse skills rather than the mythical “unique voice” that these courses often promise.

Interlude 3.0

The Laws of Raining

If you are rain, eventually your training wheels must come off, you must learn to fall freely. It's natural to progress and become independent, but if you fail, it's against the law to cry about it. Cry babies will be burned by the police. Those who precipitate correctly will live wet lives. Those unwilling to be free will show signs of illness. Sneezes come in pairs, like training wheels, to remind you that you are not completely free. If only one sneeze comes out of you, the other is lost, and being lost is a freedom from being found. It's true that losers are weepers, and finders keep living a life without pain. One good mother is all it takes to keep pushing the morphine button. One good mother is all you need to exist. It's natural to drink from a pair of breasts without the ability to speak or ride a bicycle. Alphabet blocks are like training wheels for words. To spell the name of your god, first you must exist. You need to be built around a spine, then climb down the vertebrae into the valley of your piss. That's where the founding fathers live, naturally making laws and writing them down, because one good law is worth a thousand fathers. If you stay out all night, don't come home. One good police baton can fuck up your spine. To go to heaven, you must have the freedom beaten out of you. Clouds gather to beat cats and dogs out of heaven. If you catch a tiger by the toe, your mother says to pick the very best one, and you are not it, you are the best rain ever.

Movement 3.0

Creativity on the Inside: A Prison Pedagogy

What's the Difference Between an MFA Candidate and a Prisoner?

I'd like to use the term "value" (with all of its economic, social, moral, critical, and aesthetic connotations) as a lens to look at poetry, particularly the poetic activity of two different writer-figures—the MFA candidate and the prisoner—who might appear to have opposing claims to authenticity or authority. Rather than fixing the value of poetry for these two figures, I want to unfix it, by questioning that apparent opposition, and by offering some speculations about how poetry might function in people's lives in unrecognized ways.

In 1995, shortly after receiving my MFA in poetry writing, I began teaching prisoners, not because I had a particular social mission to do this kind of work, but because I happened to be employed by a community college and one semester my teaching assignment placed me in an off-campus classroom inside a Minnesota Correctional Facility. As an adjunct teacher with little seniority, I didn't have much choice in the matter at first, but as my fear waned and my commitment to this prisoner population grew, I kept requesting more courses at various prison sites, mostly teaching Composition, until 2003, when college programming in state prisons was cut entirely by the new Republican governor. In those years, I saw the rehabilitation model of

incarceration enter its twilight while the new "get-tough-on-crime" punishment model came into dominance, when the public supposedly found less value in educating prisoners than in jacking up their sentences. In 2004 I squeezed out one more year as an independent contractor, teaching a Creative Writing course that somehow slipped under the radar of budget cuts because it didn't give students any college credit.

Here's a poem written by one of my students in that course. Dwayne Williams produced this piece spontaneously in class, in about fifteen minutes, in response to a metaphor-generating exercise. As you'll see and hear, the speaker of this piece appears to be re-examining the scene of his own crime.

Life

As life takes flight on flapping wings of eagle's fingers, tears of
snowflakes caress its back.

The pain of fiery coughs causing murder, and accidental death.

Who's to blame me for holding life in my hands in the form of a fire-
breathing dragon that takes one squeeze. Or the guy who called me a bitch and
made my dragon sneeze.

As the breeze of life escapes for the last time, sorrow consumes the
empty valleys of remorse.

Although I blame him, I know my dragon and my life were the source.

The source for a sleep so deep it must be peaceful.

There's no coming back and there will be no sequel.

For my life is now a zoo and I'm the main attraction.

So my debt is paid to the life of insults and gifts that sting the ego!

So my last words to life are I hope you live forever like frozen rain when
the wind blows.

I'm particularly interested in how the speaker of this poem performs a nuanced negotiation between claiming responsibility for being "the source" of the murder and blaming "the guy who called me a bitch" for provoking it, between apologetically accepting his punishment and seeing himself as a bitter victim of a dehumanizing system. Unwilling to settle on one stance or the other, the piece wavers between tones of regretful confession and confrontational anger, between spirited optimism and jaded pessimism, and I think that resistance to a stable stance makes the poem especially compelling.

What's the value of this poem for Dwayne? Without speaking for him, I'd like to offer some speculations based on my teaching experiences. I could say that this poem has therapeutic value for Dwayne, because he's processing highly charged psychological material and producing some self awareness. If I followed this line of thinking more cynically (or if I were a prison administrator trying to justify offering a Creative Writing course to prisoners) I could say that poetry writing helps pacify Dwayne; it functions as just another security measure disguised as a benefit for prisoners, lumped in with cable TV and a slice of pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving. On the other hand, I could say that this poem allows Dwayne to assert some oppositional political agency by critiquing the institutional systems that oppress him, by protesting against being treated like a zoo animal. A more cynical version of this political reading might say that this poem rationalizes a murder against a human being and gives Dwayne permission to commit further acts of violence.

I'd like to suggest, however, that instead of choosing a more passive, therapeutic subjectivity or a more active, oppositional subjectivity, this poem's speaker puts those options into play, performing them both without attaching to either. As the poem's writer, perhaps Dwayne performs that refusal too, recognizing both strategies for subject-formation as false freedoms. What I'm trying to suggest here is that one value of poetry is that it can resist certain values commonly attached to it. Poetry can be a kind of imaginative performance that recognizes

both writerly identities as potential losses of agency, producing a new kind of knowing that chooses not to choose.

Thus far, I've been addressing what might be called the personal or non-professional value of poetry, scrutinizing how poetry writing might contribute to a prisoner's subjectivity, or what kind of agency it might offer. I pointed to some aesthetic values in Dwayne's poem, but not as a claim for its canonical excellence, not as a bid for Dwayne's position in the literary profession. This non-evaluative, non-canonizing critical approach is common not just for poetry produced by prisoners, but by many marginalized or traumatized groups such as teen mothers, recovering addicts, war veterans, and nursing home residents. Unlike an MFA candidate, in other words, prisoners are not usually seen as in training to become literary stars who can publish books and win literary prizes, and we don't usually consider prisoner poetry as striving for the kind of exceptional aesthetic value that translates into institutional, economic value in the university. What we might find particularly refreshing about poetry written by prisoners is that it's separate from what I've heard called "po-biz," that schmoozey enterprise of winning publications and accolades. So prisoners are supposed to derive a more authentic, untainted benefit from creative practice than the opportunistic MFA candidate whose poetry might be a vehicle for building a literary career. I want to complicate this neat division of value in two ways: first, by suggesting that the professional value often associated with the MFA experience is often framed too narrowly in literary terms; secondly, by suggesting that that prisoners themselves may have their own professional or economic opportunities as poets.

It's no secret that while the MFA candidate can earn almost no money directly by publishing poems, these publications do possess what Pierre Bourdieu calls "cultural capital" or "symbolic capital," an outward rejection of market value that nonetheless creates a marketable literary status that brings teaching positions, fellowships, and so on. It's important to remember, however, that only a tiny fraction of MFA candidates actually do gain access to this literary

career track. When both conservative and progressive critics decry the professionalization of poets and the institutionalization of poetry production, they often forget that most Creative Writing students do not go on to publish widely or teach in the field.

To explain the robust growth in the Creative Writing industry, I argue, we need to consider a much broader rise in the socioeconomic value of creative skills and creative practice. Even though published poems don't earn money and literary reading is in "dramatic decline," according to a recent NEA study, global capital is transforming the U.S. into a post-industrial economy in which creativity (often called "thinking outside the box" in the new corporate workplace) is no longer widely perceived as contrary to cultural norms and profitability. All those undergraduate and graduate students of poetry writing are much less likely to become literary stars than to apply their poetic skills in what sociologist Richard Florida calls the "Creative Economy." Even if Americans find less value in reading books of poetry, they are increasingly producers and consumers of creative concepts, artful designs, and poetic experiences. And certainly the poetic skills practiced in Creative Writing courses can be an important means of production in this economy. We can dismiss this creativity as a commodified version of the real thing, and I'm certainly not suggesting that all poets and poetries are controlled by capitalism, but I do think it's crucial to consider how poetic skills can and do have enormous value in the marketplace.

Can a prisoner's poetic skills be commodified? It's true that the incarcerated have little access to professional opportunities on the outside, but I did find that poetry can take some quasi-professional value on the inside. For example, prison newspapers typically devote a significant percentage of total page space to original poetry written by inmates. And those inmates who publish in these newspapers can gain enormous value beyond whatever personal benefit they derive from the creative practice itself—a value associated with the pride or status generated by seeing yourself, or being seen by others, as possessing the authority of a published author, a

professional author. Of course, a prison newspaper does not have as selective an editorial process as *The New Yorker*; and the poetry published (often proclamations of love to partners and family members on the outside) might seem sentimental and lacking artistic rigor to some readers. I noticed that some of my convict-students tended to dismiss the newspaper poetry as trite and self-absorbed, which suggests that prisoners in general are not free from a system of aesthetic judgments and competition for cultural capital. They can certainly claim the authority that comes with both publishing in those newspapers and making those critical evaluations about the newspaper poetry, and given that they're so thoroughly deprived of authority by the carceral system, these quasi-professional values could serve a particularly powerful function in their lives.

Beyond this cultural capital of prison poetry, I was amazed to learn from my students that, within the prison's black market economy, language skills do have a significant and immediate commercial value. Many convicts have a great interest in maintaining close ties to loved ones on the outside but don't think they have enough poetic (or even basic literacy) skill to compose an eloquent expression of affection in a card or letter. Identifying the demand for poetic services, some prisoners produce and sell customized bits of poetic language (everything from simple greetings to more elaborate rap lyrics or poems) to other prisoners as content for their cards or letters. There's no officially recognized money in this underground prisoner economy, but these poetic services could be bartered for something else of value, like drugs or pornography or goods available at the prison commissary. I'm not prepared to say that all such exchanges are exploitative or unethical, but it does provoke some questions about who owns language, and in what unexpected ways poetry can be commodified. Within their different economies, perhaps the prisoner who profits from poetry has something in common with the corporate creative worker who profits from her poetic labor. For both figures, in both sites, the value of poetry is not fixed; rather, it's determined by particular circumstances in particular moments.

This means, I suggest, that we who think and write about poetry need to keep adjusting our critical scrutiny, resisting the urge to claim authenticity or authority for one site of poetry production at the expense of another. For every site, new strategies can be conceived for individuals and communities to reappropriate language and the means of poetry production. As professional scholars, we also need to ask: what kind of values do we derive from examining these various poetic activities? I have less opportunity now to earn a salary teaching in prison, but I've learned that in the academy I can translate that prison teaching experience into substantial institutional value. Poetry may not seem to pay in many ways, but for those of us in the academy, and even for a convict like Dwayne Williams, there are many ways to build a poetic career.

Freedom, Incarceration, and Creative Writing Practice

Before returning to a closer reading of Williams' poem, I'd like to present the writing prompt that I gave to him and other students in that class:

In-Class Writing: Free Association with Repetition

--Write a poem about a familiar object, place, person, idea, or action by associating it with many other things. To help generate associations, use at least one word or phrase that keeps repeating for at least part of the poem (each repetition leading to a new association).

--You can simply repeat the name of the item you're writing about, along with pronouns or synonyms referring to it. You can also repeat a longer phrase that refers directly or indirectly to that item. From each repetition you can leap in a new direction, comparing your item to something else, making interesting or unexpected metaphors.

--To avoid becoming too monotonous, you can alter or let go of the repetition as the poem moves along. Once you establish a pattern or rhythm, there's no need to feel trapped by it. Allow the

poem to grow organically and energetically. Allow yourself to be playful, surprising, and don't worry about making logical sense.

Step 1: Brainstorm familiar items and repeated phrases (2 mins).

Step 2: Write the poem (12 mins).

I give students one of these prompts almost every time we meet, and my goal with each one is to create conditions for students to generate material, to provoke their curiosities and imaginations, and to encounter techniques they might not encounter on their own. The prompts give students certain limitations, but these limitations are always meant to reveal a range of more specific possibilities, just as doorways are confined spaces that can lead to many other spaces. So I'm not at all concerned that the piece Williams generated is hard to categorize: is "Life" poetry or prose, wild lyrical flight or compressed autobiography, artful composition of sound and image or intimate expression of personal uncertainty and remorse? Despite this uncertainty, even if readers don't know that the writer is a prisoner who may well have committed a violent crime, it's not an interpretive stretch to read the "fire-breathing dragon" as a gun, "the guy who called me bitch" as the victim of the dragon's "sneeze," and this entire piece as a response to the speaker's crime and its consequences. The speaker can "blame" the dead man for the role he played in this conflict, but he also accepts responsibility for the role his "dragon" and his "life" played as "the source."

This writing features two animals, both capable of flight. We begin with the ascending hope of the eagle, symbol of American democratic freedom, but this tone is immediately colored by "tears of snowflakes," and the suggestion of violence and death telescoped back down on the ground of everyday life. Are the eagle's "fiery coughs" the cause, or is the speaker worthy of "blame"? Was the good eagle always a bad dragon in disguise, or did the speaker provoke this transformation himself, or did the victim simply get what he deserved? "Life" offers no answers to these questions, except for the one absolute certainty of incarceration: the winged animals are

confined in a zoo, and the speaker is "the main attraction," on display for the sake of public wonder and amusement.

The final two stanza-paragraphs take on the tone of closure, both beginning with a summarizing "so." What can be said about life in the zoo? There the speaker pays his proverbial debt to society, which suggests that committing a crime is like making a purchase. In exchange, one pays back one's "ego," by absorbing not only "insults" but also "gifts," a trope that perhaps hints at basic needs (food, shelter, etc.) provided by the state. The speaker is punished both by subtraction and addition: his self-worth is diminished while at the same time he receives the gift of total institutional control. The tape loop between insult and gift tells him that he's a non-person whose personhood is fully constructed by the corrections system.

A real person named Dwayne, however, did write this piece called "Life," he did assert some creative agency in an environment that seems to drain inmates of all power, and there's a first-person subject at the core of the piece. How do we account for this generative act? The speaker ends with a kind of optimistic ambiguity. "So my last words to life" suggests that the speaker is somehow dying, that this caged existence is overwhelming him. Life may be affirmed, however, as a kind of ongoing process, in this final gesture: "I hope you live forever like frozen rain when the wind blows." A strange closing image, especially considering that "frozen rain" doesn't usually "live forever." Harking back to the opening's sad precipitation, and contrasting with the fiery violence that ensues, however, "frozen rain" might continue to exist as a never-ending performance that doesn't get stuck in the always-ending circuit between insult and gift, between damaged-but-realized self and institutionally-controlled non-self. Perhaps there's a way to perform around or between this need to attach to either option, and perhaps the act of making "Life" itself is an example of that performance.

I find this piece compelling and skillfully crafted, especially considering that it was produced spontaneously by someone who has little writing experience. The modulations of

rhythm are well-tuned. There's a dizzyingly vast array of sound devices (rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance) working in such integrated ways that they barely call attention to themselves. The piece moves with agility and poise between concrete images and fluid abstractions. Although the language relies on some conventional sentimentality, it invigorates itself with startling combinations and a streetwise directness.

How Does a Workshop Work?

I'm interested in how "Life" does what it does, but I want to focus this essay on some of the conditions that might have helped produce this piece. No doubt most of those conditions are indeterminate, or involve aspects of Dwayne's experience that I don't have access to. I want to inquire instead into the structures of the Creative Writing workshop, and how these might relate to the structures of the prison system, and the larger social and political system.

I conceived the workshop to emphasize practice rather than evaluation—that is, we spent most of class setting up and performing writing exercises, actually producing work in the classroom and sharing the results with the group. I'm not exactly sure why I structured this workshop as I did, because my own formal training as a poet never deviated from that evaluative model. I took two semesters of Creative Writing as an undergraduate, and four semesters toward my MFA degree, almost all of these workshops with different teachers. Every one of them had essentially the same structure: a group of writers sitting around a table critiquing each other's writing. The writer being critiqued is usually not supposed to talk (according to "the gag rule"); rather she's supposed to absorb the positive and negative feedback, and use this to revise the piece of writing and/or improve as a writer in general, becoming more aware of an audience, etc. Even the informal post-MFA workshops I participated in with friends followed this same model. Never did any of us question it, although I've heard many people express retrospective disappointment and bitterness about the MFA experience in general.

When developing a plan for teaching Creative Writing to prisoners, I doubted that the standard workshop would work for them, a skepticism based mostly on my experience teaching Composition to prisoners in the years leading up to this teaching assignment. My main concern was the role of judgment in the classroom. Many of my prisoner-students in the past had been very sensitive to negative criticism about their work. I wanted to avoid situations that would require me as a teacher to pass judgment on their writing, but perhaps more importantly, I wanted to avoid having prisoners pass judgment on each other. Although many of them show enormous compassion and friendship toward each other, relationships among prisoners are largely informed by tensions between racial/ethnic groupings and gang affiliations, and by a pervasive power dynamic that encourages the strong to prey on the weak. I didn't want to promote more conflict by having them evaluate each other's writing.

I was also concerned about motivation, although not because prisoners lack motivation; in fact, my prisoner-students have tended to be much more active and engaged learners than my traditional students on campus. But this Creative Writing class was not being offered for college credit, meaning that students would receive no tangible, marketable return for their efforts. I also suspected that a number of students would not even aspire to identify themselves as a "creative writer," signing up for the class simply anticipating some mental stimulation in an otherwise numb world. Could I motivate such students to bring in polished pieces of writing and submit them to be critiqued by their peers? Probably not.

I'd had lots of success in Composition classes with in-class writings and other generative activities, so I decided to apply some of these techniques to the Creative Writing workshop. I imagined each of these workshop meetings to be built around a directed freewriting that would last for about fifteen minutes. For each exercise I'd provide some loose guidelines for form and/or content, and we'd also spend time reading and discussing example pieces by a range of published

authors. After the exercise, we'd read aloud the results and discuss them in non-evaluative ways, emphasizing more descriptive response and inquiries about process.

As an extra incentive, and to add more dimension to the students' writing experience, I did ask them to submit each week one out-of-class writing, which could either use strategies brought up in the previous class's exercise or be determined entirely by the author. I gave them some opportunity to read and discuss these writings with the group, but they never became the focus of class time, and we never "workshopped" them in that standard evaluative way.

After receiving a couple of batches of in-class and out-of-class writings, I noticed a significant disparity between them. The latter tended to be more constrained by formal conventions (rigid rhyme and meter schemes), more sentimental, more archaic or flatter in tone and diction, and I thought, less effective, less inspired. These out-of-class writings seemed to emerge from the narrow Hallmark-card assumptions that many Americans have about poetry (i.e. it should rhyme and express sincere emotion). Some of these writings were quite moving and well-crafted, but clearly a different sensibility tended to produce them than the one at work in class.

Here's Dwayne's first out-of-class writing, "I'm Waiting":

I'm waiting for the ice to melt
that surrounds my heart from the pain I've felt.

I'm waiting for one more chance
to eat, sleep, and think under my own command.

I'm waiting to see tomorrow, where life starts over with each day,
waiting to see the sun rise without the shadowy bars of gray.

I'm waiting to be able to embrace the one I love,
tenderly with passion, without visions of rubber gloves.

I'm waiting for my freedom, for the day I decide I can,

waiting to stand on my own two feet, and finally be a free man.

Compared to "Life," this poem develops a different relationship with readers. The speaker sounds less like a persona and more like the author himself trying to express personal feelings and desires. The poem implicitly asks readers to imagine an individual person who says these words directly to us, and these words are supposed to represent in an honest, sincere way the most important things that the person waits for. Whereas the speaker of "Life" performs a more elusive, playful music, the speaker of "I'm Waiting" cuts away the performance to get at an essential truth about his experience. The poem has a smooth, inevitable flow; its powerful simplicity is not an accident but a result of the author's skilled ear and mind.

A danger of this poetic strategy, I think, is that it becomes a kind of confinement in convention. Although this poem avoids triteness more than many poems written by less skilled writers, it does succumb to predictable end-rhymes and at least a handful of clichés. Its attempt at honest truth becomes, at times, a contrived reliance on prefabricated language and structures.

Here's another poem that uses similar poetic conventions. It's called "Feelings," written out of class by a student named Frank Blackmon:

Great Passions lie in the prison keep
Of my yearning heart, so dark and deep.
They wait for me to set them free,
But only you possess the key.
And only when my term is through
Can they display themselves to you.
And yet, I know I'll have to wait
Until that long-awaited date.
Thus every letter which you write,
I read and re-read through the night.

When I, at last, do see your face,

Dear love, my heart is sure to race.

Like "I'm Waiting," this proceeds with grace and sure-footed pace, magnified by the dead-on end-rhymes. Knowing that a prisoner wrote this makes the heart-as-prison metaphor more interesting; otherwise it relies on fairly insipid, sentimental language. Again, the speaker seems to be trying to express an authentic personal truth about his feeling for someone, and this impulse certainly can be compelling for readers. It can also make readers feel excluded from the writing.

I once asked my students what they think of the poetry typically published in the prison newspaper. A distinctly ambivalent response emerged from the group. Most students seemed in favor of having a forum like that available, and a few said that the poems were sometimes "okay." Then came the skeptical voices. One student complained that the newspaper poetry often sounds merely like "personal pleas" to girlfriends or God or the justice system. Another student said that these poems "give too much personal information," which means they're not the kind "that make you think." A third student suggested that the newspaper poems were too often cliched, like the marketing slogans in advertisements. He said, "It's like that new catch-phrase in the McDonald's commercial, 'I'm lovin' it!' What the hell does that mean?"

Frank was better able to avoid the limitations of the personal and the predictable, I think, in his in-class writings. Here's what he produced in 15 minutes in response to that same "Free Association" exercise. It's called "No More":

Stillness, like never before. Not like the flight of a bird, or that of
a little child. But that of no more. To see your breath in the winter is
beautiful to what is now. To inhale death of a cigarette is preferable.
Because now there is no more. The beautiful smell of burnt popcorn. Just
the essence of it you long for. Candle wax still smoldering, the fragrance
one would yearn for. The smell you can have no more. To flunk all your

tests in a year would be a passing grade for life. To comprehend nothing is better than no thought at all. The bitter taste of spoiled milk, the regurgitation of yesterday's meal is feeling fuller than ever before. To be able to eat no more is forever!

Language in "No More" works in a very different way than it does in "Feelings." The phrase "no more" acquires, especially in the 3rd and final sentences, a physical shape and volume, as if it were a living thing or a piece of food that we're "able to eat." And throughout the piece, the speaker calls attention not only to meaning but to ruptures of meaning. Using fragmented sentences, frequent negations, collapsing images and idioms, twists of logic, the piece brings to life the experience of not knowing, not being able to fully say with language, perhaps even having no life at all. Frank explained to the group that what he meant to describe by association was a grave; this can be useful information, yet I find the piece versatile enough not to need it. The voice, although stammering and somewhat disoriented, moves with remarkable precision, nailing down each fragile sentence with well-timed rhythm, a convincingly casual but declarative diction, and a smart mix of concrete imagery and abstract wordplay.

If I were leading an evaluative workshop and Frank had brought "No More" to be critiqued, I'd certainly have given him a good deal of positive response, especially seeing it in the context of his other work. Likewise, if Dwayne had written "Life" outside of class and brought it to the group to be "workshopped," I'd have given him plenty of affirmation, focusing mostly on what I consider the poem's strengths. If Dwayne and Frank had brought "I'm Waiting" and "Feelings" to workshop, I'd probably have felt obliged to communicate some negative criticism. Other members of the group may have agreed or disagreed, but as the workshop's central authority, I'd probably have had more influence on the group. It doesn't matter whether my critique is valid or not, I still would have communicated it to Dwayne, as other students in the group would have communicated their own opinions. Often writers receive a combination of

positive and negative feedback from individual members and the whole group. Because we strive to be sensitive and nuanced critics, we often couch the negative in some positive, or couch the positive in some negative.

The underlying and unquestioned assumption of this workshop model is that judgment is beneficial to students of writing. Affirmation tells students what they do well, so they can keep doing it and perhaps develop that skill further. Negation tells students what they do poorly, so they can stop doing it, or change it for the better. Students can then effectively revise the piece of writing, and also improve as writers in the long run. This model might seem to provide maximum freedom to students, who assert full agency by deciding individually what and how to write. They receive a range of critiques from which they can democratically choose the ones they trust the most. Then they can choose what to do with this new information: revise the poem or not, change the habits or not, etc.

I'd like to suggest, however, that the judgment model may be much less empowering than it appears, and may actually be debilitating. Affirmation may feel good, but it often encourages more sameness than growth. Negation may feel bad, but that feeling of being damaged by criticism often encourages us to hold tighter to whatever writerly identity we bring to class; to be damaged requires that we continue to identify with the identity that feels damaged. A friend of mine, Terri Ford, who earned an MFA at Warren Wilson College, tells me that whenever she'd receive negative criticism in workshop, she found herself resisting it with a little voice in her head that said, "They just don't understand me." Whether receiving praise or condemnation, our subjectivity remains static.

The standard workshop also encourages writers to write for the workshop, that is, to appeal to (or perhaps react against) the perceived tastes of the group. This may seem intuitively beneficial because writers are forced to be aware of a real warm-blooded audience. If a student is not ready for publication, then perhaps a workshop can serve as a surrogate public. I'd argue,

however, that workshops can be extremely private spaces, an array of individual personalities rather than a representative or collective body. In my own education, I very rarely revised a poem based on feedback given to me in workshop; in fact, I rarely revised poems at all during those years. It wasn't until I actually imagined my poems having a life beyond the workshop, appealing to a wider public audience, making myself accountable to that audience, that I really became aware of the need for revision, the need to discover my own blind spots, the need to develop skill not through magical inspiration but through practice.

I'm overstating my case a little. Of course my workshops were not worthless. I learned enormous amounts about writing and reading from teachers and fellow students, and I was not a poetry robot completely controlled by the insidious power of those classes. During those years, many factors outside of workshops influenced my writing process, especially my reading of published poetry, and I'm deeply grateful for the time my MFA program gave me to devote to writing.

I want to suggest, though, that standard evaluative workshops may hinder more than they promote a writer's growth, or more importantly, that their seemingly natural structure should be called into question. The structure that I've been developing for my prison classes is not a perfect alternative. Even though as a teacher I've tried to remove judgment from the learning process, I do take on a more active role in providing possibilities for my students. By creating certain in-class exercises and excluding others, by exposing students to certain sample writings and excluding others, I'm certainly imposing my writing biases on them. Considering Dwayne's and Frank's writings, I admit that I find "Life" and "No More" more interesting than "I'm Waiting," and "Feelings," and this preference aligns me with certain poetics, movements, writers, and techniques.

No teacher is free of ideology, though, and that ideology will transmit no matter what modes the teacher deploys in class. It seems to me more honest and useful to acknowledge that

teachers and students alike bring particular histories, assumptions, and preferences to class. Rather than ignoring these subjectivities, or rather than trying to find and solidify our one true subjectivity, Creative Writing workshops can be a space to generate many possible subjectivities and put them into play without attaching to them. A teacher can strive to provide the widest range of formal strategies and models possible, given the time and energy constraints of the course. The wider the range, the less likely students and teacher will cling to a single limiting writerly identity.

More importantly, the generative activities that happen in class can teach students how to practice beyond class. Too often students enter the Creative Writing workshop, especially at the MFA level, looking for confirmation that they've arrived at writerly mastery, that they've found their "voice." If they receive lots of praise, then they're the star of the workshop, and the dream has come true. If they receive lots of negative criticism, they're the losers of the workshop, and the dream has failed. What if Creative Writing workshops encouraged all students to be apprentices of the craft, to cultivate a reverence for the craft through diligent and patient practice? What if workshops were devoted not to inflating or deflating a writer's single subjectivity, but to proliferating multiple subjectivities, privileging the practice of creating always new modes, textures, and voices?

The generative workshop model I've been developing may seem obviously appropriate for prisoners, just as it may seem obviously appropriate for other non-traditional or inexperienced students such as children, at-risk adolescents, victims of trauma, non-natives, or the elderly. Populations coming to poetry for the first time, or those who don't necessarily aspire to make a career of writing, may seem to need more motivation and guidance, and be less likely to produce work on their own. Thus, the books of poetry exercises available often target these kinds of populations, most notably Kenneth Koch's books for the elderly and for children, including *Rose*, *Where Did You Get That Red?*, which was enormously influential in my planning for the prison

Creative Writing classes. Even more helpful has been a friend of mine, Sarah Fox, who has taught poetry writing to many non-traditional groups, including teen mothers, and who shared with me piles of useful resources and exercises she's developed or borrowed.

Certainly, we should ask the question, why teach writing to non-traditional students this way? But the more salient question is, I think, why *not* teach writing in the universities this way? Why is the pervasive model in higher education a group of writers sitting around a table critiquing their own writing? The most immediate answer is, I suspect, that the evaluative workshop model is much easier to teach. It requires very little preparation, sometimes no preparation if the workshop does "cold readings," that is, if participants respond immediately to work that's just been brought to class that day.

Against the dominant trend, a few teachers have developed generative workshops in university settings, such as Anne Waldman at The Naropa Institute, and Charles Bernstein, who taught for many years at SUNY-Buffalo and is now at the University of Pennsylvania. Bernstein actually doesn't teach many workshops listed under "Creative Writing"; more often he teaches Literature, but these courses often include a requirement not only to read assigned texts but to produce a significant amount of creative writing based on exercises Bernstein provides. The syllabus for his "Creative Reading Lab," for example, focuses each weekly meeting on a general writing strategy such as "Imitation," or "Invented Structures," or "Homophonic Translations," offering students a number of possible exercises within each general category, along with a slew of miscellaneous exercises. Bernstein's approach to pedagogy should have serious reverberations throughout the English discipline, for both the teaching of Literature and Creative Writing.

The Carceral Performance

Before examining more of my prisoner-students' writings, I want to offer some theoretical frameworks in which to connect the situation of prisoners to that of non-incarcerated writers and democratic citizens in general. In *Empire*, Hardt & Negri suggest that the disciplinary structure of the prison increasingly bleeds into what we call free society. Even though traditional social institutions are in crisis and breaking down, these institutions "produce subjectivity in an ever more intense way" because "the logic that once functioned primarily within the institutional walls now spreads across the entire social terrain. Inside and outside are becoming indistinguishable" (196). Hardt & Negri then pose two apparently very different institutions next to each other to illuminate their similarities: "continually decreasing proportions of the U.S. population are involved in the nuclear family, while steadily increasing proportions are confined to prisons. Both institutions, however,...are equally in crisis, in the sense that the place of their effectivity is increasingly indeterminate." So while families may eat dinner together less frequently, "discourses and practices of 'family values' seem to be everywhere across the social field." Likewise, while the prison industry booms, "carceral logics and techniques have increasingly spread to other domains of society. The production of subjectivity...tends not to be limited to any specific places. One is still always in the family, always still in school, always still in prison, and so forth" (197).

I've never been incarcerated, and most people who read this essay will never have stepped inside a prison, yet we're inundated (and we inundate ourselves) with the language of incarceration. Consider how many social discourses involve the desire for some kind of liberation from the bondage of power, space, time, injustice, prejudice, boredom, conformity, and so on. From advertisements to political speeches to pop songs, we witness or enact a sense of being trapped or oppressed, a need to be liberated, and this essay is no exception. I've already portrayed the traditional evaluative workshop as a potential limitation or confinement, and some new

pedagogical structures as a potential freedom. I'll attempt to give more nuance to this argument, but I won't transcend language and arrive at a pure space.

What does it mean to experience carceral logic? As Hardt & Negri argue, it doesn't mean that we always *feel* that we're being disciplined. "The prison (its walls, administrators, guards, laws, and so forth) does not rule its inmates the way a sovereign commands its subjects. It creates a space in which inmates, through the strategies of carceral dispositifs and through actual practices, *discipline themselves*." Extending this structure to "outside" society, especially in recent decades, sovereignty has increasingly "become virtual," which doesn't mean that it's not real. "In fact, the immanent exercise of discipline—that is, the self-disciplining of subjects, the incessant whisperings of disciplinary logics within subjectivities themselves—is extended even more generally in the society of control (330)." If the general citizenry produces a kind of prison discipline within itself, then the writing of prisoners may be especially illuminating for the general citizenry. How prisoners represent and respond to their experience and circumstances in poetry could reverberate beyond the corrections system. Moreover, what happens in a Creative Writing workshop in prison could have serious implications for what happens in a workshop on the outside.

In his essay, "What is an Author?", Foucault inquires about the "author function" in our culture, and asserts that the notion of an author owning his writing

has always been subsequent to what one might call penal appropriation. Texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors...to the extent that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive. In our culture (and doubtless in many others), discourse was not originally a product, a thing, a kind of goods; it was essentially an act...a gesture fraught with risks before becoming goods caught up in a circuit of ownership.

Once a system of ownership for texts came into being...[the author] compensated for the status that he thus acquired by... systematically practicing transgression and thereby restoring danger to a writing that was now guaranteed the benefits of ownership" (212).

If an author alternates between being "subject to punishment" and privileged with "ownership," then it grows increasingly difficult, to distinguish between authorship as crime and authorship as property. The author is potentially caught in a cycle of incarceration and freedom, danger and complacency, which implies that the situation of prisoner-writers may be strangely representative rather than exceptional.

When I asked my prisoner-students to give me permission to use their writings and their names in this essay, I was uncertain how they'd respond. I expected that at least some of them, having been convicted and punished by the public's justice system, would choose not to expose their writings to a public audience, choosing instead to remain anonymous. When I passed out an "Information Release Form" and asked them to check off their preferences, every student, without exception and without any visible hesitation, gave me the right to use their full names and all of their writings. Why were these students so willing, even eager, to claim their authorship? Of course many writers desire a public audience, and many incarcerated writers have the same desire. Living under such controlled conditions, having one's subjectivity determined so deeply by a regime of punishment, and having access to almost no personal property, a prisoner may feel even more yearning to claim something as his own.

Meanwhile, prisoners confront enormous obstacles to creating work they might want to apply their authorship to. Most non-incarcerated writers in America don't worry about having access to pen and paper, but most prisoners must purchase pen and paper at the prison commissary with wages they earn at their prison jobs, if they're lucky enough to have a job. In Minnesota, the maximum hourly wage for a prisoner is usually twenty-five cents, so acquiring the basic tools for writing may cost

more than a day's wages. More importantly, the corrections system increasingly discourages creative practice by prisoners by continually decreasing funding for prison arts and education programs. As the prison population proliferates, opportunities for formal rehabilitation diminish, and this trend may not only be an attempt to save money. Echoing Foucault's concept of the author as one who transgresses, one of my prisoner-students, Matt Bauwens, explained in a class discussion that prisoners actually don't have much access to creative expression because it's often considered dangerous by administration and security.

“What do you mean by ‘dangerous’?” I asked.

“Well, prison draws a strong line between good and evil,” he said. “Whatever goes on in here that's not officially approved, or not controlled by guards, is considered evil, and that means dangerous.”

Matt's comment reminded me of an encounter I'd had with "security" at the beginning of the semester. A prison guard had been checking me in through the front gate and glanced at my paperwork. "So you're teaching Creative Writing to these guys," he said with a sarcastic smile. "Well you should have a good class, cause there are plenty of good storytellers in here." This kind of cynicism associates storytelling with lying or failing to take responsibility, as if it were a kind of criminal activity, and I wonder how prevalent this pejorative perception is among prison guards and Americans in general. How many people consider literary writing criminally dangerous, and how might that perception inform or influence the writing itself?

As Foucault argues, writing that relies on the author function can begin by being perceived as dangerous, then become conventional property, then become dangerous again through certain transgressive poetic strategies. I'd like to suggest, further, that writing and Creative Writing workshops can perform this bipolar cycle without attaching to it. We can't transcend the cycle, but we can keep reconfiguring and reinvigorating it through performance, activity, multiplicity, and we can productively call attention to its contradictory power.

This contradiction refers back to the experience of incarceration. As another prisoner-student, Winfred LaVirgne, explained in a class discussion, “Every man in this room is dealing with some heavy emotions, you can see it in our faces. That man right there,” Winfred pointed across the room, then let his finger swivel around the circle, “and that man, and that man—it doesn’t matter who I point to, we’re all the same. What do we do with all that emotion? The way I see it, in prison you’ve got two choices, two extremes. Either be humble, or combust.”

“Combust?” I asked.

“I mean explode,” he said, “you know, go into a rage, fuck someone up, or fuck yourself up—we’ve had three suicides in my cellblock this year. Or say I’m standing around the cellblock and some dude who’s doing 300 years brushes up against me and wants to start something, I’ve got two choices: be humble and let it go—and he still might come after me anyway—or I can explode and try to attack him. Either way I’m gonna lose. It’s like a paradox.”

“And how does that relate to creativity?”

Winfred thought about it for a moment, then continued, “Well, creativity helps you talk about that paradox, helps you manage it and give it shape. You get it out of yourself by putting it on paper.”

Faced with control, intimidation, or deprivation from the corrections system and from other convicts, only two options seem available to Winfred: be passive and let yourself be diminished, or be destructive and let yourself explode. Given this opposition, anyone striving to achieve some constructive agency finds himself in a paradox, unable to succeed. Creativity, however, gives a prisoner a way to express that paradox, to release it, to discover and rediscover its productivity. Winfred suggests a way to reconfigure subjectivity as neither passive nor destructive, but as an active performance of the impossibility of that choice.

This kind of reconfiguration is amplified in Baz Kershaw's *The Radical in Performance*, which devotes an entire chapter to the prison situation. Kershaw asks, "how might radical freedom exist at the moment of greatest constraint...?" In response he proposes "somewhat riskily, the creation

of *freedom through oppression*" (133), or a kind of partial empowerment using means provided by the system of constraint itself. Kershaw refers to a screenplay, written by one of his prisoner-students, which describes the strategy a "con" uses to outsmart a "screw" and momentarily rescript the rigid disciplinary system to his advantage. Wanting to pass through a certain gate in the prison, the convict uses a kind of rhetorical performance, including a feigned momentary inability to hear what the guard is saying, to make "a space for his own autonomy" and pass through the gate. The screenplay itself refers to this action as "'blinking'...to refuse to negotiate an exchange on the terms set by the other."

This blanking translates

into an excessive performance which gestures towards an absence that the screw cannot comprehend, nor therefore control, and which exposes the flaw in the system.... In the process the autonomy of the individual, his/her ability to choose another framework and terms for negotiation, is exercised through the structures designed to eliminate it, and the achievement of such radical freedom cannot be denied....The "sterile" zone is transformed into a fertility by performance. (136)

The screenplay not only depicts a performative transformation but becomes one itself: the writer blanks the authority of the corrections system by re-authoring the system to his own advantage.

Without overtly contesting the institution's power, this writer produces a nuanced performance that slips through the gate. Not calling attention to itself as a security violation, the screenplay nonetheless demonstrates "the self-reflexivity available to its author," his ability to "'see through' the disciplinary mechanisms in such a way as to subvert, or perhaps even negate them" (139).

Kershaw further suggests that blanking, or radical freedom, can occur in power systems beyond the prison. He notes that a number of other theorists, such as Certeau and Deleuze & Guattari, have explored how power can expose its own vulnerabilities as it expands, "because paradoxically the more prodigious the effort devoted to filling every conceivable loophole in its operations, the more it will produce new ingenuities of subversion" (137).

If prisoners can achieve, as Kershaw contends, a radical freedom through writing, and if this radical freedom can translate outside of prison, then the implications for writing and Creative Writing workshops in general are considerable. Rather than conceiving of freedom in direct opposition to oppression, as many social discourses do, it's possible to conceive of a freedom achieved with indirect, performative strategies, a freedom that refuses to be either humble or to combust, as Winfred suggested. In writing, this could mean neither fixing a single "authentic" subjectivity nor obliterating subjectivity altogether, but generating and performing multiple subjectivities that refer to the contradiction without being entirely controlled by it, blanking the conventional terms of subjectivity and using them to your advantage. In a Creative Writing workshop, radical freedom might mean reconfiguring the endless loop of positive and negative judgment, re-structuring the workshop as a space of practice and generation. Rather than simply affirming or destroying the identity a writer brings to class, the workshop can be devoted to proliferating methods for changing the terms of identity construction through writing.

For Murderers, Senators, Whores, and Good Wives

After teaching prisoners Creative Writing for two semesters, I had just begun to recognize the vast possibilities available to workshops. Teaching toward practice rather than evaluation is not so much another machine that replaces the obsolete machine; it's a space that can accommodate always new and changing pedagogical strategies. It's a space for discovery and astonishment, for imagination and productivity. It's a space I find more engaging and unpredictable than the "I like this, I don't like this" monotony of roundtable critiques. My incarcerated students would build excited anticipation wondering what new approaches, exercises, and readings I'd bring to each meeting, and more importantly, they anticipated that something new and unexpected would come out of themselves. They knew that they'd be performing in class, as writers producing on the page, and as writers reading to an audience.

At one meeting, for example, I presented the beginnings of several published short stories. The task was to choose one beginning and write a continuation of the story. I wanted this exercise to highlight how a skillfully-crafted beginning can reveal many interesting directions. After finishing the exercise and reading our own versions aloud, I'd show students the rest of the stories as published by their original authors. As we began writing, I could tell that this exercise was working especially well. The room hummed with concentrated imagination, every pen sprinting feverishly across the lines of notebook paper. After fifteen minutes I asked them to finish up, then asked for volunteers to read aloud.

Jim Simon volunteered first. He choose to use the beginning of a Gary Gildner story: "When Ronald, Mr. Lacey's son, came home from the war, he showered, put on a pair of new jeans and a new T-shirt, found his old high-school baseball cap and pulled it down snug over his forehead, then went outside."

Here's how Jim finished it:

Ronald presumed of course that he could pick up where he left off. He traveled to his best friend's house and rang the bell. But it wasn't his friend who answered. His friend's mother came to the screen door.

"Hello Mrs. Johnson," said Ronald quietly.

"Ronald! You're home—I heard you were coming home. You're looking very handsome."

"Mrs. Johnson, I came to see Billy."

Mrs. Johnson froze. "Ronald, you're kidding aren't you? Billy isn't here. I thought you knew."

"Knew what? What is it I'm supposed to know?"

Mrs. Johnson spoke in a hushed tone. “When you went to war, something changed for Billy, he didn’t care about himself, he went with the wrong crowd. He wanted to be with you.”

Ronald blurted out, “Mrs. Johnson, where is he?”

“He cares about you very much, he always did and always will. He must have been with the wrong person. It's very dangerous these days, and Billy wasn’t careful. He didn’t use protection.”

“What do you mean ‘protection’?”

“Condoms...you know, condoms. Billy is at St. Barbara’s hospital. He has AIDS, Ronald.”

“I know,” said Ronald, “he got it from me.”

After a moment of silent shock about the fate of Ronald and Billy, the classroom erupted in sounds of giddy enthusiasm for the story that Jim had just spontaneously crafted. Eliseo Padrone literally stood up from his chair and did a shivery dance, mock moaning with mental overload, “Whoa whoa whoa, dude, that was so fucking freaky, I can’t even believe you just made that up. Dude, that shit was wild!”

When the energy in the room settled, I asked for other volunteers. Brent Nielson choose the beginning of a Joyce Carol Oates story: “The wrong time for him to be returning so she stands at an upstairs window watching as he drives up the driveway...”

Here’s how Brent ended the story:

praying that he’s not drunk. Her mind automatically starts to run scenarios. Preparing for what’s to come. What he will demand of her, and what she will do this time to avoid his wrath. Then she hears the car door shut. It didn’t slam so maybe he’s ok. As the tape of past events plays in her head he’s approaching the backdoor of the house. Then it opens, but nothing. No “Honey, I’m home!” Or “Where’s the fuckin’

supper?" Nothing. She's waiting for the sign. The sign his voice gives and let's her know the role she has to play tonight. Finally she says to herself, "I better get down there." As she opens the door from the upstairs, there he is. Crying like a baby. When he notices her he says, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

Again, the room broke out in the noise of pleased astonishment and surprise. Sharing these in-class writings, I notice, can evoke the communal and playful feel of a group game. There's a sense that the readers are performing, almost improvising, and the listeners are participating as well, fully engaged and anticipating some outcome that combines skill and chance.

Jack Alderman looked especially engrossed, so I asked him if he had any response. "Yeah, yeah," he said, "the cool thing was how it avoided cliches. I mean, when he first started reading, I thought it was going to be the standard story about the drunk coming home and beating up his wife. But then at the end the guy was totally crying. I never expected that."

Any piece of writing can provoke a discovery in a reader, but Eliseo and Jack seem to have responded with extraordinary intensity because they'd just participated in the same activity themselves. Hearing a room full of different imaginations negotiating the same basic task, especially if they've participated in that task, students can come to understand that literary writing is not made inevitably either by an inspired genius or an uninspired hack. Instead, it's the product of choices made by the writer, choices which could have been different, choices which could've had different effects on readers. Less experienced writers often believe that however a piece comes out of them is the only way the piece can exist. To understand that, at every moment, at every crossroads, at every word, you can change the destiny of the piece, is to create a freedom that's constantly on the move, that doesn't seek stability as a final goal.

However adept writers become at accessing multiple possibilities, they also confront limitations, a tension that prisoners may witness or enact in their daily lives more acutely than the non-incarcerated. The final out-of-class piece submitted by Winfred happens to explore this theme:

1,876 days filled by 45,024 thoughts with 2,701,440 questions. This will change 653 more times in 15,672 seconds only to wonder why? Are the possibilities as infinite as the space beyond our galaxy, but limited to the 940,320 imaginable journeys taken by the mind? Count the stars as you would the grains of sand on the beaches, measure the cosmic darkness as you would the depths of the earth's great bodies of water, but never will you comprehend my 1,878 days filled by 45,075 thoughts with 2,704,320 questions; yet if you change 651 more times in 15,612 seconds no longer will you ask or wonder why—because you are infinite and never limited by a journey taken, its purpose unknown.

This piece almost becomes pop cosmic spirituality, but it keeps evading triteness with surprising turns, logical leaps, and a speaker who drives across the page with unblinking confidence and subtle sarcasm. If you imagine the days being counted as days served in a prison sentence (or any emotional or intellectual confinement, for that matter), Winfred's piece takes on an almost narrative quality, offering the prison itself as a concrete theatre in which to view the tragic and magic story of infinite countability that never becomes fully knowable. Time passes in the writing, and numbers keep piling up or changing, and this means that "you are infinite" and simultaneously not-knowing what that infiniteness means. The absence of stable meaning can be oppressive and liberating, alternately or simultaneously, and this piece is a performance of that oscillation.

Prison is an alien place, to be sure, and yet it reflects back on free society in revealing ways, like a play whose exaggerated gestures and dramatic turns allow an audience to see themselves more clearly. Like actors, prisoners live fictional lives: their time is scripted and controlled by the authority (author) of the corrections system. These fictional lives, however, like roles played by actors, can be extremely intense, sensitive, and perceptive. Those "1,878 days" can resonate outside of prison because they're days determined intensely by a disciplinary institution that, as Hardt & Negri suggest, spreads into disciplinary society.

Winfred wrote this piece out of class, although like most of my Creative Writing students, he'd done much of his best writing spontaneously in class. Winfred's earliest out-of-class writings tended to be more sing-songy and sentimental, but in our fifteen minute exercises he'd consistently produce complex and imaginative work that would leave the group gasping in astonishment. Toward the end of each semester, I noticed that the out-of-class writings by almost all the students were showing influence from the strategies practiced in class. Fewer students were confining themselves in rigid rhyme and meter schemes, more of them were trying new personas, new levels of artifice and metaphor.

Leandrew Miller also turned in his most accomplished writing on his last day in the class. It's called "One in tha Chamber":

Why would I choose such a title? Simply because if I stay ready then I don't have to get ready. My heart has its "hollow points" because the steel that surrounds me seems "automatic" for those who found the streets as their daddy and the county as their momma. I had a twin sister name "Nina" who got adopted into the mob when my mom was a hot 22. So therefore, my great uncle "snub nose" was a 38 year old gangsta who taught me the value of pearl and nickel-plated.

My first murder was an "accident" at the age of 13, which I won't deny or lie about like most niggas. And by me being so scared of what I had done, I got away from the scene, hid what had become my favorite toy, and never told anyone how good it felt.

One day I was on "semi-automatic" street, apartment #380, and I met this older cat named "Colt," he was 45 and in it to win when it came to gettin' money. So in other words, I grew to love the things that I was exposed to. I guess you can say that my heart that had its "hollow points" made me reload wit "dumb-dumbs,"

because my ego was like teflon. You couldn't tell me *shit* to penetrate what was already in my chamber.

As time went on, I found myself mingling and rubbin' elbows with the exact same characteristics mentioned early on in this reality checc, but only this time, the shit doesn't feel as good as it use to. Because the steel that I'm surrounded by now got me jammed, and some of us will never pull the same shit again...you feel me?

I like how the first sentence of this piece immediately calls attention to the choices available to this speaker, to its artificial construction. The choices aren't arbitrary or meaningless, but implicit in that opening is the admission that this is one of many possible performances of the speaker. In this performance, the speaker takes on the persona of a gun whose thoughts and emotions and behaviors are determined by his gun-ness, especially by a feeling of cold-blooded protectiveness and fierce power. This is a remarkable extended metaphor by itself, but Leandrew takes it even further, turning it inside-out when the speaker recognizes that the gun's protective and oppressive exterior is really the same as the prison's "steel" exterior, and that he's stuck on the inside of both. Those last three words, set up by the beautifully placed pause, make the end *really* end with a devastatingly cool and certain colloquial street phrase, nearly but not quite synonymous with "do you understand me?" The word "feel" is more direct and bullet-like, and it gets at the sensory deprivation hinted at throughout the piece. I can't really feel myself, the speaker implies—can you feel me, can anyone?

Matt Bauwens's out-of-class writings went through a similar transformation, but on a different stylistic plane. A precocious young white man with a quirky but refined sensibility, Matt obviously had read widely in the Western literary canon and appeared to have plenty of experience writing. Early on, he turned in poems that were wildly playful, full of cleverly colliding allusions and neologisms, and yet also very tightly controlled, relying on fixed meter and end-rhyme schemes, and a lofty archaic diction. As Matt absorbed more in-class writings, as he practiced new formal strategies and learned to generate spontaneously, his out-of-class assignments grew looser and more attuned to

contemporary speech. He turned in this poem, for example, later in the course. It's called "Pardon My Acronym":

Fascism under consent of the king
Hearts...broken, mended; repeat the cycle
That rips you apart and morphs you into something pretended

What suicide is this?

Dear conception that belongs to the miss
Because you've dealt your last hand to the can't that can

A latest testing installment in testify
So naturally comes the assault of anti

Good day to you madame miss

The one who persecuted the perfect kind of prolepsis

Queen's pawn to plight's message
Constricted upon offices of poorly lit passage

Salem is now the Camelot in life

I never asked for the betrayal of you

The rack of dam that made what ensued

Invitation, this royal scent became

Not one of five, yet a numbered name

In odd numbers there is luck

And the more there is to trust,

The more there is to...

Freedom under consent of the king
Not sooner or later
His fallacies are passive, aren't they?
Master hater
Transformed the practiced into prey
Conformed to an extent that liability equals dismay
A basket to some
Is the casket for the numb
Back again, how odd

This poem resists interpretation in so many ways, beginning with the title's sly apology for being elusive. The poem does, however, keep returning to the question of power, posing fascism and freedom as equally receiving "consent of the king." The speaker doesn't attempt to solve the problem of power but performs its cascading paradoxes in almost every line, inverting syntactic and semantic expectations. He speaks as if only to "repeat the cycle" between fascism and freedom, the little bastard promises of modern political systems, which echo Winfred's choices either to be humble or combust. Even though Matt's earliest out-of-class writings were stiffer and more classically trained than "Pardon My Acronym," his in-class writings showed that looser downward spiral action from the very first meeting.

One class, for example, I based entirely around "questions," as a rhetorical device and as an approach to subject-matter. I began by provoking some discussion about what the effect of asking questions can be, and what we expect from questions, as the ones who ask or the ones who are asked. Then I handed out some copies of poems based largely on questions, the first being Blake's "The Tyger." I'd gotten the idea to use this poem from Koch's *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*, although the exercise Koch builds around the poem is different than the one I came up with. As a teacher, I found myself frequently reworking other teacher's exercises for my own needs, or what I

thought my students might need. I also handed out "question" poems by Pablo Neruda and W.S. Merwin, and after discussion about all three poems individually and in relation to one another, I handed out the following directions:

In-Class Writing: Questions

--Write a poem or prose piece using only questions, or mostly questions.

--Consider different organizing strategies:

- a) your questions might all be asked to one particular object, animal, person, idea, place, etc. (see Blake poem)*
- b) your questions might be asked to a general audience but all be about one particular object, animal, person, idea, place, etc.*
- c) your questions might suggest a story, leading readers through a series of events, following one or more characters through a particular setting*
- d) your questions might each be followed by an answer, which in turn leads to another question (see Merwin poem)*
- e) your questions might relate to each other randomly, or only through sound or metaphor; that is, the distance you travel between each question could be what holds them together (see Neruda poem)*

Step 1: Choose an organizing strategy above, or make up your own; jot notes (2-3 min)

Step 2: Write the poem or prose piece (13 min)

After going through the directions, I always try to prepare the students for the exercise. I encourage them to concentrate on the task and keep focused for fifteen minutes, to block out distractions and establish a direct connection between their mind and the page. I also encourage them to be fully accepting of themselves and their writing, to let go of the need for perfection and just keep brain and pen moving for the entire exercise, allowing imagination to happen on the page without self-censorship

I almost always participate in the exercise myself, partly because I want students to know that I'm just as likely to benefit from it as they are, partly because it's fun to lose myself entirely for fifteen minutes while teaching. To be in a room full of writers, collectively engaged in the same basic task and yet fully in our own composing process, is a remarkable experience. More than one of the prisoner-students have said that duration of the exercise is the only time they ever really forget they're in prison. They're completely inside the writing, but they're outside the corrections system. Describing the intensity in the room during the exercises, a student named Ronald Schneider once said, "when we write in class, it feels like we have smoke coming out of our ears." The results are almost always surprisingly dynamic and powerful, and the writers often beam with pride and amazement at their creations, although Matt tended to project a cooler exterior than others. Here's the "question" poem he composed in class:

When can the headache go
When can education be prescribed
Am I collegic really if I spend four years in rehab
As one can graduate with honors
Can I do the same with donors
When may I perform a census on my brain cells
And can those results come as a pitcher of coffee
Can my will out-perform my Shelby
Does it get better gas mileage
Which weapon will I choose
When it comes time to stop the watch
Which watch will I
While I view so still
What painting could I be, when I hang myself from the color

Who are you to take this expression for a spin
And what have you done with my headache
It has a copyright
When was the last time you sat down and really defined a word
When was the last time you stood up and defined?

Despite the playfully humorous tone of this poem, it allows itself to address social and political problems quite directly. It inquires about how institutional structure and ideology produce what we call "education" and distinguishes it from "rehab." How does our personal agency and decision-making get shaped by everything from drugs to commodities, from time to art to a headache? The penultimate line questions our ability or willingness to fully define a word, intimating the imperfection of language, and in a fascinating move, the final line suggests a different kind of lack: the impossibility of defining your body, your mind, "yourself." This poem may finally be an epistemological inquiry, questioning not just the world or the self, but the modes through which we come to know these things. It's decidedly skeptical of knowability and how knowing is used as a mechanism of control.

Less intellectually rigorous than Matt's "question" poem is one that borrows a question/answer strategy from the Merwin's "Some Last Questions," an untitled piece composed by Manuel Ramos:

Why is the world round?
A: We like ice cream.
Animals run wild in the forest because?
A: The rain is singing.
Flowers bloom in spring after?
A: The birds fly away.
Sand cascades down the beach?

A: When lions eat.

White clouds billow in the midst?

A: When the mountain yawns.

Black soot covers the walls?

A: When the water flows.

Seals swim across the ocean?

A: Away from the sharks.

The first question and answer could be a great poem by themselves. The relationship between them proliferates startling metaphorical possibility, beginning with the suggestion that the world might be a scoop of ice cream that we round with our tongue. The rest of the poem plays with our cause-and-effect expectations, re-animating the "natural" world with new connections between phenomenon, unlocking the magic that conventional scientific method ignores.

Reading these pieces even more closely now I'm astonished that the students produced them so quickly. Both poems, in very different ways, achieve a level of complexity one might expect from polished work, or at least from more experienced writers. Having seen a good amount of writing from my students, I can gauge how far individual pieces venture into uncharted territory, and it became increasingly clear to me that in-class writings can grant enormous permission to students to go anywhere and everywhere.

I built another in-class exercise around the concept of "The Modern Parable," a writing that borrows structures and references from traditional parables, legends, fables, or fairy-tales, and updates them for a modern audience. Here's what Jeff Ness produced:

The light was fading, the light was dying. The patriarch reached for the rusted wooden wet ladder—the dimming bulb had to be changed.

With each ebb and flow of life in the bulb the patriarch took an unsteady creaky step up the ladder's rungs, the new light-giving bulb clutched greedily in the sweaty shaking hand.

The bulb dimmed further....

"Oh God I can't make it," patriarch moaned in deepest despair.

The creaking ladder gave a heavy sigh of burden and patriarch lost his precarious hold on the new light. Breathlessly it fell to the wet stone floor, shattering in hundreds of egg-white shards of glass.

The light darkened further.

"Oh no," patriarch cried in despair.

The broken shards looked up at him and cried a voice of doom. The ladder's wrung gave a last gasp and the room went dark.

Notice how quietly this writing invokes the familiar lightbulb joke without becoming a joke itself. In fact, the tone here is grave and tragic. The patriarch, allegorical figure of authority and strength, seems to be unable to accomplish the simplest task. No longer is it "blondes" trying to change the lightbulb, but "the Man" himself, and it's not going well. As the patriarch grows more vulnerable, the world of objects grows more animated, as if reclaiming a power that he'd appropriated during his prime. The shards now have the ability to see and speak in a "voice of doom," and the ladder's wrung expresses human relief that the patriarch's bid to enlighten his domain has finally failed.

On the same exercise, a student named James Thomas produced a piece that similarly undermines authority, but using very different material. He calls it "Party Time":

The tumble weeds decided to throw a party and invited the tree. They mingled, enjoying each other's company.

A gentle breeze moved tumble weeds about pleasantly at first. The breeze became a wind and the tumble weeds huddled against the tree. The wind became a gale and the tree embraced the tumble weeds.

The tumble weeds asked, "Oh tree, how is it you remain so calm when we fear for our very lives?"

The tree said, "My roots are planted deep and I am firm yet supple enough to sway with the strongest of winds."

At that precise moment a bolt of lightning struck the tree and the tumble weeds scattered.

The tumble weeds turn out to be the unexpected heroes of this little allegorical tale. The tree, symbol of hierarchical strength and stability, seems at first to be in control of the (political) party, but the almost punch-line ending reverses fortunes, giving the tree a devastating blow and recuperating the nuanced, nomadic power of the tumble weeds.

Many of my pedagogical strategies tried to provoke humor, play, and proliferation in my students' writing, mostly because their early out-of-class writing often lacked these qualities. I've tried to be aware of the degree to which my own poetic sensibilities feed into my class plans, and although I don't pretend to achieve an objective balance, I did make attempts to counter my tendencies and present strategies to students that I might not consider otherwise. Certain exercises, for example, I developed to practice new kinds of clarity, seriousness, and distillation.

One I call "The Instant Autobiography" had us writing the "story of our lives" in fifteen minutes. If we can't say everything, how do we choose what to say? I began a group discussion by asking what kinds of material might be useful in an autobiography, suggesting that evocative or resonant moments might be more effective than "important" moments. Then I passed out sample autobiographical poems by Nazim Hikmet and Nikki Giovanni, and we discussed how both writers handle intense personal experience in different ways.

The life story of one of my students, Sarith Peou, happens to be among the most disturbing and dramatic I've ever heard. Sarith was born in Cambodia and survived a regime of torture in a Khmer Rouge prison camp. After becoming a refugee and living in America for a number of years, he was convicted of a double homicide and now resides in a Minnesota prison.

I first met Sarith in a college-level Composition class I taught years earlier at another correctional facility. At that time he had extremely remedial English writing skills, and despite his eagerness to learn, he was clearly unstable and depressed, often missing class because he'd been placed on "suicide watch." By the time he took my Creative Writing course he appeared to have learned how to manage or overcome his depression; he'd also become a literacy tutor for other prisoners, and had written more than 250 pages of his memoir, which he had enormous determination to finish and publish. One day after class we were talking and I asked him how he'd his mental health had improved. He'd obviously thought about this question and didn't hesitate to answer: "There have been three important things. I am taking medication, I am writing my life story, and I am practicing Buddhism. Before these things, I didn't know it was possible to feel differently."

I find it noteworthy that Sarith considered his writing not just to be facilitated by his mental health but to actively promote it. I read much of his memoir and found it engaging, honest, and well-written, although it was still looking for the kind of structure or frame that would make it publishable. Having already spent so much time writing a full-length autobiography, Sarith's response to "The Instant Autobiography" promised to be interesting. He began the poem in class, then turned in the following revised draft at our next meeting:

At 33, I was sentenced for two lives in prison

Where I went back to school

Where I have been tutoring

Where I am recovering from my past trauma

Where I have been writing my memoir

I was born in '62, in Kandal province, Cambodia
I started school in '68 and school ended when I was 13
In '70, my family escaped to Phnom Penh
To evade war
The war followed us, and
In '75, the communist Khmer Rouge took over the country
We were expelled to the countryside
At 13, I was snatched from my family to a labor camp
At 15, I was imprisoned and tortured
One-third of the youths were executed
I escaped death several times
In '79, the Khmer Rouge regime fell
I found my family again
Without my father, brother-in-law, grandparents
They had been executed along with several of my uncles

The Khmer Rouge communists lost power
Only to other communists (Vietnamese)
They told us, "We have only changed the driver, but we are still in the
same bus"

I fled my country to find freedom somewhere else
At 22, I became a world displaced person
At 24, I became a formal refugee
At 26, I came to America

I devoted my life to help less fortunate people

At 32, I entered politics

I have been high and

I have been low

I ate with world celebrities

I made friends with the untouchables

I used to pay rent and

I used to collect rent

I used to fly across the world and

I used to live in a burrow

I used to help people save their lives from suicide and

I used to be saved from suicide

What else will happen to me?

I could die in prison or

I could find my freedom before I die, but

I will still die

What difference does it make?

I like this poem's unpunctuated, improvised, sometimes jaunty feel, all qualities it borrows from Hikmet's "Autobiography." The speaker resists overdramatizing his inherently dramatic experiences, treating most of the details with a kind of paratactic equality. There's a slightly performative tone, however, in the speaker's self-obsession, a slight self-reflexivity that doesn't manifest in the full-length memoir. Moreover, this poem opens up some new structural possibilities. Whereas the

memoir's narrative arc begins in childhood and ends shortly after Sarith's arrival in America, this poem begins and ends with the defining fact of his present life—his conviction and incarceration—giving his past a potential frame, giving readers a vantage from which to read his life.

Sarith's poem ends by undermining its own claim for memorialization, reminding himself and us that life's only certainty is that it ends. The last line—"What difference does it make?"—sounds nicely poised between a fatigued indifference to life's randomness and a liberated non-attachment to an ephemeral selfhood. It accepts both of these tones, allows them to coincide without needing to decide on one or the other.

As a theme, death certainly crept into much of my students' writing. One young man named John Reuben, for example, wrote almost entirely about witnessing the accidental death of his younger brother when they were children. Later in the semester it occurred to me to devote a class to "The Language of Mortality," to see if we could discover fresh possibilities and approaches to this theme. I set up the exercise with some general discussion about different ways we can think and talk about death. Then we examined a number of example poems by Cesar Vallejo, Frank O'Hara, Etheridge Knight, and others. A student named Jack Alderman responded to the exercise in class, then used the same exercise out of class to initiate the following untitled piece:

Do people die of love? I knew a man on a factory fishing ship in the Bering sea, a killer who had fallen in love with a woman, a whore who died at sea. He erased himself from the face of the earth by stripping off his clothes and plunging through the ice. The shock of the water on bare skin must have been incredible. But the man was immensely strong and kept swimming away, away, away from the light. For murderers, senators, whores and good wives, loves proves to be not the lamp at the ship's bow but the ship itself, and when the light is gone a person has no place to go but down.

Although no expert in love, I am an expert in death, and I know the possibilities of a relatively painless death for the diver. What killed expert swimmers practicing underwater laps in pools was not a strangling on water but the soft oblivion of oxygen deprivation.

This writing reads almost like an essay, moving from conceptual questions to anecdotal evidence, and held together by an authoritative voice. The argument, however, is overwhelmed by the quiet lyricism and skillfully slippery language. We're not entirely certain, for example, what kills the killer. Is it the loss of the woman he loves? Was the love itself never real, only the services of a whore? Does the man mistake love for a light that once guided him, a light from which he now must retreat to avoid the pain of loss? Does the man fail to realize that love is never up ahead, not something to seek, but like the ship that already always carries us, that exists right here unless we seek to recede into death?

In any case, what's true about love for the criminals of the world (the murderers and whores) is also true for those who own the socially-sanctioned power (the senators and good wives). The appearance of legitimacy is a veil hiding our vulnerability to desire and ambition; the illegitimate live that vulnerability unveiled. While both may seem to spend their lives seeking love (also known as "success"), they may really be seeking "a relatively painless death" through "the soft oblivion of oxygen deprivation."

I happen to know that Jack has spent more than twenty years, almost his entire adult life, in prison. Like Sarith, he took a Composition class with me years ago, and at that time he was one of the angriest people I'd ever met, often challenging me in front of the class, exuding a bitterness in almost everything he said and wrote. Since then he has transformed in amazing ways, and in the Creative Writing workshop he always showed respect to me and other students. In fact, he was among the most committed students in the class, never missing a meeting, encouraging his peers, offering thoughtful comments in discussions, and his work always showed diligence and imagination. I

wonder if this transformation has informed his ability to see similarities between murderers and senators.

Whether Jack plays the part of "good" or "bad" prisoner, what made him an especially effective student of Creative Writing, I think, is that he didn't come to class clinging to a particular writing identity. He did have more prosaic tendencies than many of his peers, but he was able to shift into writing poems or prose-poems without hesitation. Whatever new formal or thematic strategy we approached in class, he was willing to explore, absorb, and practice it, as if always a beginner. Despite his unceasing enthusiasm for the class, he never seemed to be searching for that one true authorial self, that one voice revealed by the light on the ship's bow. In fact, unlike some other talented students, he never seemed particularly interested in having his talents affirmed or praised. He approached the class and the craft as an apprentice, as someone fully engaged in the practice and the learning process, someone living on the ship itself rather than pretending to have arrived already at the ship's object of desire.

Against the Wheel of Motion

Jack Alderman came to the workshop with an attitude toward writing and learning that complemented the generative structure I developed, but I think this structure also helped nurture that attitude in Jack and the other students. Toward the end of the course, I asked everyone to respond briefly in writing to the following question: "How has your writing (and your perceptions and attitudes about writing) been affected by class activities, especially in-class writings, readings of published authors, readings of our own writing, and discussions about writing?" I emphasized that I wanted them, as best they could, to describe the course's effects rather than judging the course positively or negatively. The overwhelming majority of students remarked, in one way or another, that the workshop had made them aware of limitations they'd previously put on themselves as writers, and that they now saw many more possibilities.

Commenting on the in-class readings of published authors, Jack wrote, "When I think of subject matter through a new and different lens, one that is introduced by our reading of some previously unknown (to me) author, then I inevitably broaden my vision and search for previously untapped resources within myself." Lenny Gillespie similarly sees himself opening up,

First, I'm not as shy of a writer as I used to be, I have much more confidence. The in-class writing has helped to not be such a perfectionist. I just write, and if I can't finish something, I don't force it, I put it to the side and come back to it with a fresh start. You have opened my mind to variety and fresh ideas. I won't allow myself to get stuck or think I'm forced to only write one way.

Like Lenny, Ron Schneider also suggests a new confidence through exposure to difference.

I learned to read at a very early age, yet I always shied away from writing. Now in prison I put myself against the wheel of motion, and I try. The in-house writing has helped me to feel a connection with the various authors whose materials we read. Now, especially, I don't feel shy about writing (by "shy" I mean the fear of *oneself*, not the other).

In a different way, Dwayne Williams turns fear into a productive force, saying, "This class has expanded my knowledge and understanding of what writing means to me! The depth of my creativity is so deep sometimes I fear being swallowed up!" Jim Simon also suggests a kind of leaping into the unknown, "I have surprised myself in the writing time provided because there is no time to plan. It has forced me to dive in and swim. The surprise is that some spontaneous things have felt more 'right' than some of my planned writing." This kind of letting go of preconceptions about writing and oneself is echoed by James Thomas:

I have discovered that writing isn't about a super-rigid structure but more of free flowing ideas. I am better able to create images than I had imagined. The readings of

published authors demonstrate just how loose one can be in his style and convey ideas that he may not have even thought of himself. That is what I meant by rigid.

Finally Derik Sherwood points out his new ability to go deeper than surface judgments of writing:

When I first started this class all I thought I could do is rhyme, and I also only read poems and either liked or disliked them. Since you started to go over different poems to see what we interpret about them, it has helped me to take a deeper look at my old favorite poems. But the best thing is the in-class writing, which has helped me to get past my mental blocks.

All of these comments indicate that the workshop has expanded or changed the way these writers perceive themselves and their craft. Rather than solidifying (or destroying) their writerly subjectivity, the generative workshop can provide space to discover and produce new subjectivities. It tells writers that they've neither succeeded nor failed but are engaged in a practice which will allow them to gain a wider and wider range of skills. It offers a new kind of freedom that keeps generating new freedoms, rather than a transcendent self-realization or individual voice that we're told writers are supposed to arrive at. This reconfiguration of freedom as process or multiplicity has unique implications for these students given that they're incarcerated. Rather than waging a conventional battle against oppression by constructing an authentic identity through language, these imprisoned writers are learning how to perform an ever-proliferating array of subject positions.

I think MFA candidates and undergraduates could benefit from these pedagogical approaches as much as prisoners do. The evaluative model that dominates Creative Writing workshops held in universities should be scrutinized and questioned. What seems like an inevitable, transparent, or obviously useful structure (i.e. writers critiquing each other's work), may impose limitations on participants that are rarely considered. Juliana Spahr echoes the approach I take as a teacher in an interview published in *Rain Taxi*:

I believe that some of the most important work that teachers can do is to point out to students the wide range of possibilities available to them as writers and how that range can enliven their capacities to make sense of where they are, where they want to go in the world. I work hard to teach a multiplicity of poetics. And I often begin classes with a lecture where I attempt to map out the often overlapping concerns of different poetics around today....

My goal here is just to denaturalize any single poetry, and to expose students to the wideness of contemporary writing practices. I often try to give students a range of works around a single form in creative writing classrooms. We will look at the sonnet, and we'll read ones written by Petrarch, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Claude McKay, Bernadette Mayer, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Lorenzo Thomas, etc. Then we'll list all the different ways the sonnet can be the sonnet. I'm always trying in these discussions to get at a deeper history of form here. To look at how Shakespeare reacts to Petrarch and then how McKay and Mayer react to this same courtly love tradition in very different ways. And then discuss what parts of the sonnet that a tradition like New Formalism is holding onto so tight.

Not merely advocating that her students become avid readers, Spahr conceives of a workshop that actively investigates a given form from multiple vantages. The form, then, becomes a space of possibility, a stage on which many different performances can be enacted. And the workshop itself becomes a forum where "a multiplicity of poetics" can be considered and performed, which implies further that the workshop can generate community.

Elsewhere in this interview Spahr talks about trying to construct the workshop as a communal space, especially through collaborative exercises. My prisoner-students responded enthusiastically, for example, to composing a series of Exquisite Corpses, after the well-known Surrealist parlor game. The resulting poems may not have achieved greatness, but the practice of writing off another student's

line, several times in quick succession, encouraged their imaginations to work in radically new ways. Experiencing language not as private property but as public activity with social relevance can be crucial to a writer's development. Hearing startling continuities and proliferations of meaning in a poem written by several people (but with only partial awareness of what each other has written) suggests that poetry doesn't have to be (and perhaps never is) the product of a solitary isolated mind. The workshop then can be devoted to enlarging and enriching the community of subjectivities that each writer can access and perform. This kind of communal sensibility may eventually have practical implications beyond the workshop community. Spahr points to this kind of bridge, but admits that it's a difficult one to reach: "Then the harder issue...getting the community into the creative writing classroom. Or getting cultural issues into the creative writing classroom. Or getting students out in the community from the creative writing classroom (poets in schools; poets in prisons; poets in...)." This kind of community outreach is difficult in large part because institutions like schools and prisons present enormous bureaucratic and logistical challenges, as I've come to know well in my own prison work. If, however, as Hardt & Negri argue, institutional logic increasingly spreads into our minds and bodies, then the physical space where poets engage the community is less important than the quality of the engagement itself. If MFA students, for example, were simply required to attend more public readings or other literary events in their community, the classroom bubble might begin to break down.

A generative workshop may be messier than a conventional workshop. It asks students to take substantial risks, to question their relationship to themselves, each other, and society, and especially to question their relationship to writing and language. I've found that in-class exercises can be effective tools to perform these risks without relying on judgment, but exercises don't always produce "excellence," even if your definition of that contested term is very forgiving. There's certainly a danger that repeated spontaneous writing will encourage students to be sloppy and careless in all their writing. More importantly, exercises tend to highlight a limited set of formal strategies, and excellent

poems are usually devoted to letting go of such limitations. In other words, poems don't usually want to sound like the product of an exercise. But if the workshop can acknowledge that its purpose is to give students structures for practicing and gaining new skills, to give them a period of apprenticeship, then the workshop need not present excellence or success as an immediate goal. In the long run, most writers will do their best writing beyond the workshop setting, or they'll stop writing. The workshop, then, can encourage students to postpone their aspirations for realizing their writing identity, and instead engage in continuous discovery.

I'll admit again (and finally) that I've overstated my case. A practice-oriented workshop should certainly incorporate out-of-class writing as part of its larger investigation of the writing process (as my case study shows), and some conventional critiquing of this more polished writing could be an effective teaching strategy. What I want to communicate most of all is that Creative Writing workshops should not be confined to that evaluative model. Displacing the cycle of positive and negative criticism in the classroom can allow students to develop a stronger and more varied range of skills, because that displacement allows those skills to avoid being bound up in a single subjectivity.

As my yoga teacher says, "don't take success or failure personally." I've been practicing in the Iyengar tradition with him for years, and without ever feeling judged, I'm reminded in every class that I'm just beginning a lifetime of work, just beginning to develop a base of skills, and that the tradition of yoga is much larger than any individual talent I seem to possess. If a student asks my teacher about a certain pose and wants an easy technique for improving, he'll sometimes say, half-jokingly, "Well, practice the pose for fifteen or twenty more years and see what happens." Creative Writing workshops could benefit from nurturing this kind of reverence for an active, ongoing practice.

Interlude 4.0

The Corrected Text

There is nothing strange about the fact that lambs bear a grudge towards large birds of prey: but that is no reason to blame the larger birds of prey for carrying off the little lambs. And if the lambs say to each other, "These birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey and most like its opposite, a lamb,--is good, isn't he?", then there is no reason to raise objections to this setting-up of an ideal beyond the fact that the birds of prey will view it somewhat derisively, and will perhaps say, "We don't bear any grudge at all towards these good lambs, in fact we love them, nothing is tastier than a tender lamb."

--Friedrich Nietzsche,
On the Genealogy of Morality (28)

It is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmations that the author has disappeared. For the same reason, it is not enough to keep repeating that God and man have died a common death. Instead, we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings this disappearance uncovers.

--Michel Foucault,
"What is an Author?" (209)

What you have read so far is true. It has been written by Steve Healey. He is a real person with a body and a name given to him at birth. He is in fact the only person who has told the truth so far. In fact that is a lie. Steve Healey is in fact being punished for lying right now. He has not been good, and as you can see, he is not here now. He has disappeared completely. He has gone out for a walk. See him walk right out of the Correctional Facility as if he were free. See him drive down

Route 36 toward the city where he thinks he lives. His disappearance has been displaced by a series of openings that can be seen at the speed at which he travels.

What is being corrected at the Correctional Facility? First of all, my personality. Second, my personality is on fire right now. My personality is something I want to share with you because I deserve to be punished. Steve Healey's personality is now free to listen to National Public Radio while driving, but it is the week when all they do is ask for money, and the news has disappeared. Become a member, they say, and make your guilt disappear.

He remembers feeling guilty, in fact he remembers almost nothing except what made him feel guilty, and the feeling is most acute not when he remembers being punished but not being punished, as if not being were itself a kind of punishment. There was the time when he was a kid and told another kid he would kill him if he didn't sponsor him for the walkathon to raise money to cure a disease. Did he ever really get the punishment he deserved?

That is why Steve Healey has written what you have read so far. To correct himself, and yet he is so far from being corrected. The car travels from east to west at well above the posted speed limit. He can see the sun beginning to disappear. His vision is perfect. His eyesight needs no correcting. He hears a voice coming from the radio. Please help us, please....

Movement 4.0

From Workshop to Collaborative Practice

The Segregated Fields of English Studies

The three primary camps of English Studies—Literary Studies, Composition, and Creative Writing—have been remarkably unwilling to collaborate and benefit from each other's strengths, although they're certainly willing to point out each other's weaknesses. What has prevented this kind of collaboration and transformation? The history of the English discipline, as Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature* and other studies assert, is a history of internal conflict. Graff sees a larger struggle between traditional humanists who've championed the study of literature for its own sake and a series of insurgent movements that initially pose a threat and eventually come to be seen as traditionalists themselves. The "subversive innovation" of an earlier generation, says Graff, became "the very same sins for which later traditionalists indicted the New Criticism and present day traditionalists indict literary theory: elevating esoteric, technocratic jargon over humanistic values, coming between literature itself and the student, turning literature into an elitist pastime for specialists" (4).

According to Graff, these recurring waves of ideological conflict have, however, been hidden from public view, particularly by "the field-coverage principle," which divides literary studies into key periods and genres covered by specialists. Each subfield then constitutes a separate domain ruled and regulated by its own specialists, so that "the job of instruction [can] proceed as if on automatic pilot, without the need for instructors to debate aims and methods" (7).

This system encourages changes in the discipline, then, not so much within each subfield or in the relations between them, but merely by expanding the numbers of subfields: "innovation even of a threatening kind could be welcomed by simply *adding* another unit to the aggregate of fields to be covered" (7). Graff focuses primarily on the silent conflicts within Literary Studies, but it's worth considering how the system he describes operates between that field and its neighbors in English, Composition and Creative Writing.

I suggest that the rise of Creative Writing, especially in the last three decades, indicates a reconfiguration of the "tradition vs. innovation" battle that keeps arising within Literary Studies. Creative Writing is often said to be taking up the traditional humanist mission of literary appreciation that Literary Studies supposedly dropped a couple of decades ago. I've tried to interrogate that apparently self-evident perception here, but the perception does have the real effects of isolating Creative Writing and contributing to the larger culture of hostility within English. Creative Writing may appear to be the final outpost for appreciating literature itself, but if that's true, why is the boom in the Creative Writing business coinciding with a "dramatic decline" in literary reading? The answer is that Creative Writing is thriving not because there's a great demand for poetry and prose fiction, but because there's a great demand for creative literacy throughout the social system.

Nonetheless, the myth of Creative Writing as a traditionalist literary island gives the English discipline as a whole permission to avoid questioning itself. What Graff says about Literary Studies—that the "categories existed in order to make it unnecessary to think about them and to recognize that they were the product of theoretical choices" (8)—can now be applied across the triumvirate of English fields. Anyone involved in an English department as a student, teacher, or administrator, has felt the chilly distance between creative writers, compositionists, and literary scholars. This alienation functions primarily to give the members of each field a unique claim to legitimacy. Literary scholars have a claim on intellectual rigor and theory.

Compositionists have a claim on public service and pedagogy. And creative writers have a claim on anti-academic aesthetics and creativity. Each of these claims has a certain power or attraction, but I'd say that Creative Writing's claim is particularly attractive in our current "think outside the box" social context. Creative Writing therefore may appear to have the most to lose in collaborating with the other fields, because its cultural capital is most valuable now, but it also has enormous potential to gain from collaboration, not only to improve its own practices, but to increase its presence and build relationships within the academic community.

A Collaborative Environment in English Studies?

Some important ground-clearing for collaboration among English fields has already been done by several commentators, all of whom question the traditional workshop's emphasis on evaluating literary works as isolated art objects. Without rejecting the Creative Writing field entirely, all these reform proposals maintain that literary writing is not simply a private act of individual talent but a public act that participates in public life. This social dimension exists not only in some idealized non-institutional utopia; it also needs to be found and nurtured inside the academy, which means that Creative Writing cannot pretend to be anti-academic, and other fields need to recognize its academic legitimacy.

Amato and Fleisher, in their ambitious essay called "Reforming Creative Writing Pedagogy: History as Knowledge, Knowledge as Activism," offer a kind of manic scrutiny of "student (and faculty) orientation toward workshop and marketplace product (whether conceived as publishable writing or writer), and the corresponding resistance to process" (17). At the core of their proposal for new pedagogy is a more expansive view of process which breaks down rather than bolsters the Romantic insulation surrounding the writer. This process would be informed especially by a collaborative or social "awareness on the part of the writer as to the conditions of his or her authorial circumstances—which is to say, a grasp of the *context* in which the writing

process is to take place" (17). This contextualizing would involve, according to Amato and Fleisher, a redistribution or questioning of literary authority through "a sustained classroom discussion of literary value—of the overarching rationale that supports why we like what we like, what it is that gives us pleasure, pain, etc." (28). This kind of classroom would be quite different than the standard evaluative workshop in which literary values are asserted exhaustively but without any reflexive questioning of how those values are produced socially, how they participate in a larger system of cultural capital, how they compete for status as pure and natural spaces of authenticity. Whether that traditional workshop critique makes positive or negative evaluations, or whether it pretends to be neutral, I argue that it tends to solidify student work into products, to transform it from a process of possibilities into an object of critical judgment, and this can undermine the development of a skillful, socially-engaged writing practice in students.

In his impressive book-length study, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, Paul Dawson provides elaborate historical and theoretical frameworks to illuminate the Creative Writing field. Less combative than Amato & Fleisher, Dawson admits, and even accepts, that Creative Writing has traditionally been less interested in examining the creative process than in reading written products critically: "what enables the writing workshop to function is not a theory of writing, but a theory of reading.... How a work is *composed* by the student is not as important as how it can be *read*" (88). Dawson's mission is not to reorient some of the field's attention toward that creative composition and to develop a theory of writing, as I would advocate; instead, he advocates reforming the kind of critical reading it does. What's particularly useful in his study, then, is his mapping of potential collaborations between Creative Writing and Literary Studies, and his argument that Creative Writing needs to let go of its anti-intellectual, anti-academic tendencies.

Dawson traces the relationship of these two English fields to its present formation in which Creative Writing (as guardian of now-traditional criticism that addresses the self contained

literary object and its aesthetic techniques) is positioned as adversary to Literary Studies (which has now become saturated by "theory," that nebulous and wide-ranging body of intellectual work that often questions or contextualizes the privileged status of literature). Frustrated by this opposition, Dawson conceives of a more harmonious synthesis of the fields, a post-theory mode of criticism that has more public relevance. Moving from a "formalist poetics" to a "sociological poetics," the reformed Creative Writing workshop would be a space where "each student manuscript is not only afforded a remedial technical overhauling...but is placed within a broader cultural or political context by the critical expertise of the teacher." This doesn't mean abandoning formal or technical concerns in favor of concerns about content, but examining "how content is realized in the formal construction of a text" (208). If Dawson's pedagogy misses the opportunity to consider modes of textual production, it does point to important new strategies for approaching literary products in socially responsible ways.

Complementing Dawson's work is Tim Mayers' (*Re) Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and The Future of English Studies*, which advocates that Creative Writing and Composition join forces to counter the longstanding dominance of Literary Studies. Mayers' historical account of English sounds like a sibling rivalry narrative, with Composition made to feel inferior to Literary Studies but always trying to compete with its intellectual rigor, and Creative Writing maintaining a smug distance from that struggle for academic legitimacy. The two weaker siblings have been divided and conquered by the stronger, according to Mayers, and for the balance of power to shift, the weaker need to cooperate and collaborate. As he says, "the goal must be to move English studies away from a structural model in which textual production tends to be valued primarily as a vehicle for textual interpretation and toward a structural model in which exactly the opposite is true" (110). I'm not interested in pushing Literary Studies to the margins of the English discipline, but I do agree with Mayers that textual production should be given a more prominent place, particularly in the Creative Writing field.

The most compelling component of his study comes in the final chapter when he maps out specific strategies for that kind of structural change in all three of the major English subfields. The Composition course, for example, could encourage students to draw out the "poetic elements" (135) in their academic writing; it could also make space for practicing creative genres like poetry alongside traditional academic writing. The Literary Studies course could find a balance between textual interpretation and production by requiring students to practice writing in a number of genres, including creative genres; it could also require students to make sustained inquiries into what terms like "literature" actually mean, and how they function socially. Finally, the Creative Writing course could focus less on polishing the aesthetic craft of student texts and more on examining how they "might fit into a larger textual network" (139). Mayers even suggests a more radical shift away from the product-centered workshop: "Perhaps creative writing teachers who rely exclusively on workshops need to begin devising alternative activities for their classes—activities that, as a supplement to workshops, would allow for sustained reflection on the very enterprise of creative writing as it relates to larger social, political, and rhetorical trends" (148).

An Accidental Collaborator

My Creative Writing pedagogy has emerged (and continues to emerge) from my training in the three major fields of the English discipline, borrowing Composition's acute focus on stages of writing process that can be scrutinized and practiced in the classroom, borrowing Literary Studies's theoretical tools for reading texts in relation to contexts (literary, social, economic, etc). I did not really choose to take this interdisciplinary approach, but having been a graduate and adjunct instructor in several English departments in my teaching career, I've learned to be flexible and willing to teach outside my specialty. I regularly teach courses in all three major English fields, and I notice that it grows harder to determine which field each of my courses

occupies because they've become increasingly hybridized. Whatever its title, I design the course to borrow strategies from Creative Writing, Literary Studies, and Composition, and I've grown increasingly convinced that the future of the English curriculum will be found in the interstices between these fields. The most relevant courses in the coming years, I think, will have titles like "Creative Reading," "Creative Academic Writing," and "Literature about Literary Practice." This kind of hybridizing has the great benefit of unfixing the fundamental assumptions of each field, encouraging teachers and students to be less attached to their own preconceptions about the kind of work each field is supposed to perform. I don't propose that all English teachers strive to be like me and receive the same training, but I do think it's crucial for these fields to create stronger conditions for such collaborations, to allow more possibility for orienting toward each other. The persistent balkanization of English into adversarial territories not only ignores the potential benefits of triangulating creative, critical, and pedagogical methods, but it also ignores new social contexts that are changing what it means for the entire discipline to be socially relevant in the coming years.

As new regimes of production arise in American society, the functions of language and literature are also transforming. In this historical moment we have to ask the question: why are poems now more likely to be written by English students (taking a Creative Writing course) but less likely to be studied by English students (taking a Literary Studies course)? The answer cannot simply refer to some self-contained institutional battle with its winners and losers. As John Guillory argues, while the canon wars rage on, there has been a larger shift in cultural capital away from literature in general. "It has proven to be much easier to quarrel about the content of the curriculum," he says, "than to confront the implications of a fully emergent professional-managerial class which no longer requires the cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie" (45). This new class—what Richard Florida calls "the Creative Class"—no longer finds as much value in cultivating a traditional appreciation for literature, and despite the rise of multiculturalism, being

able to quote a multiculti hero like Li-Young Lee (rather than Keats) at a cocktail party doesn't really increase that value.

If Guillory's argument is correct and literature as an object of study is losing cultural capital, does this mean that the English discipline will inevitably decline as well? In *The Employment of English*, Michael Berube argues that "'literature' may indeed have declined in cultural authority but 'English' remains a potentially valuable career asset" (22). While he agrees with Guillory that the ability to make allusions to the literary canon no longer wields much social power, he stakes out new space for English in the new global economy that requires flexible workers who can thrive in unstable circumstances. In this historical moment, says Berube, English degrees can "mark their recipients as people who can potentially negotiate a wide range of intellectual tasks and handle (in various ways) disparate kinds of 'textual' material, from memos, legal briefs, and white papers to ad campaigns, databases, and electronic newsmagazines" (23). Berube sees Cultural Studies as having helped English make this conversion of cultural capital, although he actually advocates a Literary Studies/Cultural Studies hybrid as a model for the future of English. I would add that Creative Writing also needs to be considered a significant new form of cultural capital, and that hybridizing or collaborating needs to extend throughout English.

Perhaps literature's cultural capital, then, is not so much disappearing as transforming; whereas the old bourgeoisie studied the canonical works, members of the new class create their own literary works because the skills they develop in doing so have great social worth that may eventually translate into economic worth. This doesn't mean that Creative Writing has stolen cultural capital away from traditional literary study; rather, these shifts in cultural capital reflect larger developments in a post-industrial American society. What Guillory and Berube help us recognize is that no English field has a more legitimate claim to authority or authenticity, and that

shifts in literature's cultural capital are not simply the result of isolated choices made by participants in those fields.

I'm not interested, therefore, in proclaiming this current configuration of cultural capital good or bad; nor do I claim either the supposedly humanist mission of saving literature or the supposedly antihumanist mission of killing literature with critique. If writing creatively has acquired more cultural capital than studying and appreciating literature, this doesn't mean that one of these activities is more or less legitimate.

Teaching Collaboration Rather Than Aesthetic Ownership

I have argued that the traditional workshop method reproduces New Criticism's approach to the literary work as an isolated art object whose aesthetic value can be determined through "close reading," attending to the work's technical excellence. Close reading is an important intellectual skill that can be useful in many critical situations, but when applied to student-writers in such high doses, and when focused on the goal of evaluating literary merit, it can have detrimental effects. Isolating the literary work for critical judgment tends to isolate the whole Creative Writing field from other academic fields and from the larger public. It also tends to isolate the student-writer by reinforcing the Romantic myth that literary works are the products of exceptional individual talent, that the writer must stake out her own original island of excellence, and that there is only so much greatness to go around in the free-market economy of the workshop, which means that there will be only a few winners and a lot of losers. As isolated authors, Creative Writing students struggle against each other for workshop approval, which means that the traditional workshop method tends to breed a competitive environment. To win the competition and receive approval means that students can claim ownership of their "one true

voice,” their unique style, and even the losers in this system are still encouraged to keep striving for that exceptional writerly identity.

As a teacher of Creative Writing, I want to give my students creative and intellectual freedom, but not by encouraging competition and aesthetic ownership. The goal of teaching Creative Writing, I suggest, should not be to help students arrive at their own unique creative vision but to give them access to the widest possible array of aesthetic modes, skills, techniques, voices, and perspectives. This means encouraging them to develop a collaborative attitude with other literary practitioners, whether they be fellow students or famous published writers. Rather than competing for the status of original talent, students can see their writing as the product of a collaboration between themselves and any other writers who have interesting techniques to learn from, between themselves and literary history, between themselves and language, between themselves and society, culture, the other arts, etc. A collaborative attitude means cultivating a broad, generous, inclusive palette of skills and formal assumptions, cultivating a curiosity about the unknown and a willingness to be patient, to suspend the desire for quick success and establish a rich, ongoing practice that never requires arrival. Students don’t find educational freedom in finding “themselves” but in challenging what they already know, challenging what they think they don’t know, and expanding the range of what they can know. Imagining their writing and reading practice as collaborative can help bring about a new orientation toward knowledge and learning.

Traditional Creative Writing pedagogy is often justified with the wise-sounding aphorism: writing can’t be taught. Teachers who believe this are likely showing reverence for the great writers of the past who never needed to earn an MFA degree and whose work was too complex and revolutionary to be guided by a lesson plan or a writing assignment. The genius writers of the past supposedly created their genius works on their own, with a gift supplied by the muses, and teachers are too human and flawed to supply this genius. A new kind of freedom in

the Creative Writing classroom can be built upon a belief that writing *can* be taught. Talent—or what I prefer to call *skill*—is something that can be developed in students, cultivated by an active pedagogy that gives students more guidance to look beyond a narrow writerly identity. A belief that Creative Writing teachers can actually teach means that the classroom can be not just a space for evaluative workshopping but for a rigorous writing and reading practice. In the context of this academic field, the term “practice” can reclaim the original meaning of “workshop” as a space for doing, for learning how to do by doing, for engaging in an activity repeatedly and with guidance so as to become more proficient. “Practice” also suggests a letting go of the need for quick success and a willingness to commit to a kind of ongoing apprenticeship without the need to achieve the status of master or genius.

Within this Creative Writing practice space, students can be more productive, more eclectic, and more critically aware of their practice. This means that they should work through many writing and reading assignments over the course of the semester, experiencing many starts and finishes, repeating the process to make it familiar, less mysterious and anxiety-inducing, less reliant on magic and inspiration than on regular habit and effort. Practice also means that students should encounter a wide range of skills and aesthetic approaches throughout the semester, so each cluster of assignments and exercises should address a different and complementary set of techniques. The more aesthetic perspectives students empathize with, the less likely they are to lock into one narrow perspective or their “one true voice,” the more versatile they will be over time. A Creative Writing practice could also mean that students become more critically aware of their writing process and their social position as writers. With guidance from teachers, students can learn to analyze their own writing tendencies, identifying patterns not only in how they generate, develop, and revise material, but also in how they use language, how they create speakers, characters, structures, transitions, and images. Students can also be encouraged to consider their relationships as writers to larger social forces. What are the ethics of speaking for

others? What do advertising and poetry have in common? Why are Creative Writing classes so popular even while literary reading rates are on the decline? These kinds of questions can help students emerge from insularity and begin to see their writing practice in a social context with social consequences.

A Creative Writing Course Proposal

What can happen in a Creative Writing course other than traditional workshops? When I teach an introductory, multi-genre course, I break the semester into three units, each devoted to a different genre: creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. Each unit is made up of three weekly writing assignments designed to give students a range of tasks to develop a variety of skills. Here's an overview of that assignment schedule:

Week 1) Creative Nonfiction 1: A Brief Memoir

Write a creative essay based on your own memory or personal experience, using the first person point of view ("I"). Consider strategies for breaking out of a contained, linear narrative by manipulating time & space through flashbacks, digressions, commentary, etc.

Week 2) Creative Nonfiction 2: The Observation Essay

Write a creative essay based on observation. Rather than looking at your personal, internal experience, look externally, at a specific social or cultural situation, at a specific instance of human behavior, etc. As in CNF 1, consider strategies for manipulating time & space.

Week 3) Creative Nonfiction 3: The Sectioned Essay

Write a creative essay that uses an overt visual strategy to break up the linear progression of the writing. In other words, develop your essay as a collection of sections or parts that are somewhat self-contained but that also find some sense of coherence, the parts all having a common theme, idea, object, obsession, stylistic pattern, character, etc.

Week 4) Small Group Workshops/Revision

Week 5) Fiction 1: Third Person Point of View

Write a short story in the third person point of view (“she”/”he”/”they”) that borrows from some of your own personal experience or observation.

Week 6. Fiction 2: First Person Persona

Write a short story in the first person point of view but without equating yourself entirely with that “I” or “we.” Consider how your narrator could be, to some degree, an unreliable or unlikable persona.

Week 7: Fiction 3: Realistic Nonrealism

Write a short story that includes some nonrealistic material and yet also maintains some sense of realism, finding a balance that creates interesting tension and dimension.

Week 8: Small Group Workshop/Revision

Week 9: Poetry 1: Self Formations and Deformations

Write a poem in the first person singular (“I”) point of view. Some poems written in this POV might be called a self formation (an autobiographical, narrative-based expression of your personal identity), while others might be called a self deformation (a fragmented multiplicity of personas). Consider how your poem could borrow from both of these modes, generating a sense of tension or balance between them.

Week 10: Poetry 2: Repetition and Listing

Write a poem that uses some kind of repetition or listing technique but also finds ways to break out of the potential monotony of that technique by changing it or letting it go as the poem develops.

Week 11: Poetry 3: Journeys

Write a poem that resembles a journey in structure, always moving on to new territory, through time and space, rather than returning to the familiar (as we did in the repetition/listing assignment). Despite this wandering quality of the poem, try to give it some sense of progression or coherence or consistent voice.

Week 12: Small Group Workshop/Revision

The actual guidelines for each assignment are much more detailed and extensive than I've outlined above, usually filling up two full pages of a handout. These guidelines attempt to build on skills encountered in previous assignments while also giving students access to unfamiliar territory, and the third assignment in each unit tends to be the most adventurous and challenging. Of course, three assignments cannot give students a thorough sense of a genre, but if carefully crafted, they can serve as nodes in a much larger constellation, allowing students to glimpse the overall shape of that large space and the possibilities within it. Usually the basic task of the assignment is generic enough to give students freedom to generate whatever content and form they find motivating, but I also usually offer a qualification or caveat, urging the writer to nuance or balance out that basic task with counter-forces. For example, the first Creative Nonfiction assignment asks students to write a brief memoir in the first person POV; without further guidance many students would produce a competent but flat, one-dimensional, linear narrative about a past series of events. To help students avoid getting trapped in surface detail and create more depth in their writing, I encourage them to use strategies for "manipulating time & space," and in class we discuss and practice these strategies.

I call this intensive guidance "frontloading" rather than "backloading," that is, intervening in the writing process before it happens and while it's happening rather than after a written product already exists. It could be argued that frontloading takes away agency from students and imposes the teacher's aesthetic and social bias on them. Teachers are certainly not

transcendent beings who achieve pure objectivity, but they can teach a process that points away from a narrow, congealed set of writing tendencies; this requires, however, letting go of the impulse to teach “excellence.” Instead of turning students into “the best” writers possible, teachers can help students become *eclectic* in their aesthetic orientation, cultivating in them a curiosity for as many different kinds of writing as possible. Even if the student has no prior experience as a creative writer, she will inevitably bring to class some preconceptions about what poems, stories, and essays are, and what her own writerly identity is. The goal of frontloading is not simply to replace these preconceptions with other “better” preconceptions imposed by the teacher; rather, frontloading encourages students to keep unfixing those preconceptions, letting go of attachments to a narrow vision of literary practice, seeing practice as an ongoing process of learning.

Each of my writing assignments is designed to promote this kind of eclecticism, and I find that the more guidance I give, the better able students are to imagine further options and strategies on their own. So the writing assignments come with a detailed handout giving more specific guidelines, usually including a list of more focused potential formal approaches to the general writing task. For example, for the first poetry assignment, *Self Formations and Deformations*, I present the following formal possibilities

- 1) **Self-portrait.** Imagine writing yourself as a visual artist would draw, paint, sculpt, or photograph herself. You could focus on physical details, as if seen in a mirror, but also consider including mental formations (memories, observations, thoughts, misunderstandings, gossip).
- 2) **Condensed Autobiography.** A quick overview of your life featuring a handful of vivid, specific images or moments from early childhood up to the present. Let the structure of the poem occur organically, without the need for linear progression through time.

- 3) **Exaggerated You.** Write with the voice of a magnified emotion or mood you've experienced by focusing on the specific, physical details in which that emotion/mood occurred. Think of this voice as a cartoon version of yourself but not so cartoonish that readers can't believe it.
- 4) **Persona.** Write in the first person ("I"/"we") but from the point of view of someone or something that you are not. Take on the persona of an object, an idea, a place, an animal, a famous/infamous person, an unusual person, etc.
- 5) **Memory games.** Write about a specific memory from your past, but present it in some unexpected way, or write about several unrelated memories as if they were related.
- 6) **Letter to Yourself.** Write a letter to yourself, either from yourself or from an imagined other person. What can you reveal or conceal about yourself as the primary audience of this letter?
- 7) **Speculative Scenes.** Describe a scene from your past life which you were not fully conscious of, such as your own birth, or a scene from the your future, such as your own death.

I make it clear in these guidelines and during class sessions that students are free to adjust the broader assignment to fit their own needs or generate their own focused formal approach to the general task. The approaches I present are always optional, designed not so much to limit students as to show them what a wide range of options there are, and to trigger their own imaginations. After distributing and initially discussing the assignment, I choose one of the focused formal approaches as a prompt for an in-class exercise, and after setting up the prompt, I distribute a selection of sample poems to serve as models. To show students how many different ways there are to write in this form, I try to make the selection of models historically, aesthetically, and socially diverse. For the first poetry assignment I often choose the "self-portrait" as the in-class writing prompt, and the model selection includes poems by nineteenth century poets like Emily Dickinson and John Clare, modernists like Laura Riding and Lorine Niedecker, and contemporaries like Terrence Hayes, Spencer Reece, and Lisa Jarnot. We read and briefly discuss these poems, and I try to emphasize that none of them is more correct or

excellent or authentic than the others, and all of them have historical context (both as products of literary tradition and products of specific social forces).

With this assignment/exercise in particular, I want students to question the notion that “the self” is a natural, inevitable fact, and to consider how identity can be formed and deformed by language and other social forces. A poem that takes on a more direct, sincere autobiographical tone, telling a contained story based on personal experience (exemplified in Spencer Reece’s poem, for example), is no less a product of formal techniques than a poem with an indirect, performed, uncertain tone, interrogating the speaker’s selfhood through multivocality, absurdity, or humor (exemplified by Lisa Jarnot’s poem, for example). We discuss both advantages and dangers of these different approaches, how they fit or don’t fit into notions of traditional and avant-garde aesthetics. I emphasize that while these oppositions have existed in critical discourse, they’re not absolute or fixed, and as writers of poems, our job is not necessarily to choose sides or resolve the conflicts. I emphasize that most poems don’t fit neatly into one school or camp.

Just before the in-class exercise begins, I remind students to be spontaneous and let the words flow onto their paper, to keep writing for fifteen minutes even if they feel stuck or confused about how to proceed. The goal of the exercise is not to write a perfect piece but to generate material with a sense of curiosity and adventure. I usually join the students in performing the exercise, and after we’re done, I ask for volunteers to read aloud, and we discuss the process and the results. Students are welcome to use what they’ve written in class as a rough draft for the larger weekly assignment, but they can also start with new material entirely. What matters is that they’ve begun the writing process, that they leave class with some sense of having begun, so that that the writing practice integrates with their everyday lives. As they walk out the classroom door, as they trudge through snow or squint in the warm sunlight, as they hear the crows cackle in the trees or the smoker exhale on the steps of the library, I want these students to be thinking about that writing assignment, gathering possible material for it, rehearsing lines in

their minds, so that the practice is not something they keep postponing until they finally sit down at the computer.

Each writing assignment is accompanied by a formal reading assignment from one of the course anthologies, usually a selection of 15-25 shorter pieces that model the writing techniques in many different ways, and students are required to submit brief analytical responses to these readings. Again, I frontload this assignment, not expecting students simply to know how to analyze literary works, but giving them general guidance and advice about how to proceed, along with specific instructions for their analytical response. For example, the instructions for the “Self Formations and Deformations” reading assignment asks students to focus attention on how each poem performs an act of self formation and/or deformation by examining the speaker of each poem, considering what kind of character or personality this speaker has, what kinds of patterns emerge in the speaker’s voice or tone, and what other techniques the poem uses to develop this speaker. In class we discuss the students’ analytical responses to further expand our ways of approaching the general writing task, and this kind of activity, I hope, gives students a sense that they’re collaborating with each other and with all the published writers, learning from each other as they all work through a similar set of challenges.

As the assignment unfolds over the span of a week or more, I give students reflexive activities, or what I call “meta-moments,” designed to look back on the assignment from a critical distance, to interrogate the most basic assumptions from which writers often proceed. For the “Self Formations and Deformations” assignment I might pose these discussion questions: Do we really have a "self," and if so, what is it, where does it come from? Why has American poetry been so concerned with the self (at least since Whitman), and what have been the effects of this obsession? What is (or should be) the relationship between the poem's speaker and writer? Should a speaker or writer strive to be authentic or authoritative, and if so, how? As a class we might step back even farther and consider larger questions about process or the social position of writing:

Why do so many writers procrastinate, and can procrastination be useful? Why do so many writers resist revision? Why might a writer be interested in nonrealistic material, and why are there so many examples of nonrealism in advertising these days? I consider it less important to arrive at firm answers to such questions than to have asked them and used them to provoke discussion. Rather than arriving at a fixed poetic knowledge or sensibility, I want my students to cultivate a deeper curiosity, to access many modes of poetry production, and to inquire about the historical (literary, social, etc.) conditions of that production.

Subsequent assignment units continue this kind of pedagogical pattern, giving students permission to practice diverse writing skills while developing critical awareness of that practice. By the semester's end, they've written nine new pieces in three genres, so they've experienced a rigorous writing schedule with many starts and finishes, giving them more familiarity with the routine of a writing process; at the same time, they've practiced many different tasks and considered many different approaches to those tasks, so they've learned to have a more eclectic orientation toward their writing than they did at the beginning of the semester. This kind of practice coupled with the critical activities helps writers become flexible rather than rigidly attached to a single notion of excellence. The Creative Writing course should not be primarily concerned with making students excellent writers; excellence is a highly unstable value that can be left for publishers, editors, book reviewers, and pundits to claim. In the classroom, a teacher's job is not to anoint the superstars and dismiss the failures but to help every student gain skill, confidence, and awareness. Teachers can accomplish this by suspending evaluation as much as possible and devoting their efforts to developing writers with eclectic aesthetic orientations and a critical curiosity. These students will likely produce excellent writing in the short and long term, but what matters primarily is that they learn an ongoing, versatile, collaborative practice.

Recalibrating Evaluation

Can evaluation really be jettisoned entirely from the Creative Writing course? Don't teachers still need to give students grades? It's true that some kind of evaluation mechanisms are necessary and even useful, but these mechanisms can be recalibrated to diminish competition among students.

At the beginning of the semester, I give students a clear and written set of expectations about what they need to do to earn a good grade in the course, but many of these criteria I call "nonevaluative" because they don't involve any judgment of students' writing products. These criteria include: completing and submitting all the writing and reading assignments, on time, and with evidence of effort; actively participating in class activities; attending class regularly and being punctual. Unless a student has serious difficulty with basic English writing skills, she can earn at least a B in the course by fulfilling the nonevaluative criteria, and I present this set of expectations as a kind of grading contract. The difference between a B and an A grade does involve some value judgment on my part about the excellence of the writing, but almost always those who produce the highest quality work have put forth the most effort as well. Like most Creative Writing teachers, I don't give students letter grades on individual writings, but I do give them a mid-semester grade so that they understand how well I think they're fulfilling that grading contract well before the semester's end. If students grow anxious about their letter grade, I encourage them to talk to me in person so that we can work out a specific plan for them to succeed in the course.

Along with each writing assignment, students are required to submit a "response note" that answers two questions: 1) What were you trying to accomplish or communicate? 2) How well do you think you did this, or how can this writing be improved? This response note asks students to be both descriptive and evaluative about their writing, and I find that they tend to give intense attention to this note, as if hungry for the opportunity to articulate their views about their

writing in this way. Typically when a student turns in a piece of writing, she does so without any comments to the teacher about the process she went through, about her struggles and breakthroughs, about any weaknesses and strengths she perceives, as if the writing emerged fully formed from her mind, as if she considers it a perfect finished product. Adding a response note to the writing immediately reframes it as something that was produced, something that's still in the process of production, something that the student-writer claims and takes responsibility for, understanding that language, thinking, and imagination are in a fluid state.

The response note implicitly signals the start of a dialogue, and I when I write comments on the students' drafts, I'm responding to their response notes as well as to their creative works. The majority of my students tend to evaluate their own writing more harshly than I do, so my comments often try to reframe their work in a more optimistic, constructive light, affirming the strengths and suggesting strategies for further revision. While I don't give letter grades on individual assignments, I do make one broader evaluative comment to give students a sense of how well they performed, but this evaluation is usually framed in the context of that student's other work. In other words, I might write, "This piece is even more fully realized and compelling than your first fiction assignment." As a teacher I want to diminish the sense of competition among my students, and one way I do that is to make that competitive energy reflexive. Rather than trying to be better than their peers, students can try to write better than they wrote earlier in the semester. Not all students are the same, but in a sense my job is always the same: to help every student, no matter how skilled they are coming into the course, become even more skilled by the semester's end. How these students compare with each other, then, is less relevant than how much they improve, how much they learn.

The primary evaluative mode in the traditional workshop is the group critique of student work, usually spoken in a discussion but also sometimes coming in written form. Is there any room for this workshopping in my course proposal? Despite my pessimism about the workshop

method, I have slowly reclaimed a limited and adjusted version of it for my pedagogy. I found that while my students were relieved not to be stuck in that traditional format, they did want to read and engage with the work of their peers. So I developed a method of workshopping in small groups at three key transitional points during the semester, at the end of each genre unit. I divide the class into groups of four to six students, trying to create a balance of personalities, aesthetic tendencies, and skill levels in each group. Students distribute copies of one or two assignments from that genre to other group members in advance, and each group member reads and writes comments on these copies outside of class. In the guidelines for this group work I emphasize that in their comments students should avoid simply judging the work of their peers positively or negatively; they should instead analyze what the piece is trying to accomplish or communicate, and how it can improve in further revisions. I don't pretend to rid this workshopping of evaluation entirely, but I do want students to be as thoughtful and nuanced as possible in their commentaries.

On workshop day, students gather in their groups and discuss their responses, and what I observe is that the small size of these groups makes them more intimate and relaxed, less anxious about who will acquire high status and authority within the workshop. Unlike a traditional workshop, I remove myself from these small groups and let the students themselves determine the course of the conversation, and I think my absence (I'm present in the room, but at a distance) helps decenter each group, not giving it an obvious anchor of authority for students to cling to.

I don't impose a "gag rule" on these small groups; that is, unlike most traditional workshops, these allow the writer whose work is being discussed to participate in the discussion. The "gag rule" supposedly prevents the writer's intentions from muddying the pristine waters through which the group can critique the finished literary object. To approach the text as something still in the process of being made, and more importantly, to approach the writer as someone engaged in an ongoing practice, it's crucial for that writer to participate in the

discussion. Just as my written comments on student drafts benefit from a response note written by the student, the small group discussions can benefit from an understanding of what the writer was trying to do and what kind of comments she would find most useful. While the “gag rule” may appear to diminish the potential for writers to cling to the arrogant dream of their exceptional talent, I suggest that it has the opposite effect because it privileges the product as the supreme object of critical scrutiny while reinforcing the author’s ego by silencing it. Just because that author can’t speak doesn’t mean that her writerly identity goes away; instead the “gag rule” magnifies that identity by metaphorically torturing it in the presence of the group. Allowing the writer to speak is to allow an act of collaboration between her and the other student-writers, diminishing the air of competition in the room.

A Creative Writing course, then, can set up evaluative mechanisms that allow students to participate in the process, joining in a dialogue with teacher and other students about what their work is trying to do and how it can be improved. After each small group workshop for a particular genre, I require my students to substantially revise one writing from that unit and re-submit it, so they can immediately apply the comments they’ve received, engaging with them in practical, productive ways. As they sift through the different critical perspectives offered about their work and generate their own revision plan, they experience writing as a collaborative activity that benefits from empathy and flexibility. The traditional workshop method often presents itself as being oriented toward process and revision—students are supposed to use the group critiques to improve their writing—but none of the undergraduate or graduate workshops I took actually required me to revise, and like many students, I didn’t do what wasn’t required. My main motivation in workshops was to produce new writing that would receive approval from my teachers and fellow students, so it was hard to see the benefit of returning to a piece on my own time to try to improve it. I certainly gained a lot of practice, producing many new drafts of poetry, often one each week, but like many other students, I tended to keep writing the same kind of

poetry without a pedagogy designed to give me an eclectic attitude toward form and aesthetics. My poems did receive plenty of approval from my workshops, but after being “workshopped,” they often entered a file folder and I soon forgot about them. I’m not suggesting that Creating Writing courses should be devoted to perfecting products; on the contrary, my pedagogy is devoted to learning wide-ranging means of literary production, and this requires that students become more skilled at revision as part of an ongoing practice.

Interlude 5.0

Creative Consultant

Can you make something for me? Can it be something I want? How about a toaster? How about the idea of a toaster? The endlessly deep desire to transubstantiate bread into toast. Butter melting, honey spreading. The sound of a miracle.

How about an animal? Can you make, for example, a bird? How about a crow? Along with the crow, the idea of winter. Awake in the crazy cold, ten inky black smudges on the leafless branches of that hackberry tree. You can choose to create this. You can be innovative.

Here's another idea. Winter is all about windows, but the best windows make you forget they exist. A window is a vehicle for going somewhere. Draw your gaze down from the tallest hackberry tree in the world and check out the sidewalk. What's that on the sidewalk, sitting there in the crazy cold? A toaster? A very small piano? How about the idea of your success as a piano player? If you want to become a virtuoso, practice. Let your fingers become the little black and white keys, let the sound be warm like a little fire.

This fire is the product of your labor, and your labor has value. Labor can produce a piano fire or a bird, and all of this can be produced by a window in the middle of winter. The window is closed because it's five degrees below zero, but at the same time, the window doesn't exist. Or it is the idea of not existing. In this way forgetfulness can be productive.

Do you remember the first warm bath you ever took? Warm like fire, but really water. Like looking out a perfectly forgotten window, there's no difference between the water and your skin. The skin of your hands, your belly, even your face touches the water, and when you look through it, there's the crow that used to come around when your parents were destroying each other.

You pretended to own that crow. Can a crow be owned? You even gave the crow a name: Crow. In a very real way, Crow didn't exist until you gave it a capital C. If you are the author of Crow, you are entitled to copyright protection. To receive copyright protection, a work must be "original" and "fixed" in a tangible medium of expression. Then you feel sad when Crow disappears from the window. Do you want something to make you feel better?

Movement 5.0

Poetry, Advertising, and American Contradiction

Whence Did We Come?

From his nineteenth century vantage, Alexis de Tocqueville argues that Americans are much more prone than the English to rely on general categories to group particulars together, and he sees the roots of this tendency in the relative equality of the American democratic system compared to England's hierarchical aristocratic system. In Volume 2, Chapter 3 of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville asserts that one

who inhabits a democratic country sees around him, on every hand, men differing but little from each other; he cannot turn his mind to any one portion of mankind, without expanding and dilating his thought till it embrace the whole. All truths which are applicable to himself, appear to him equally and similarly applicable to each of his fellow-citizens and fellow-men (16).

Tocqueville is suspicious of this attraction to the general, accusing it of being intellectually insufficient because it doesn't discriminate between things that are ultimately heterogeneous. People living in democratic societies, he says, are so focused on the practical that they have little time for thought. General categories or labels "contain...a great deal in a little compass, and give, in a little time, a great return," which spares the democratic individual "the trouble of studying particulars" (18-19).

Often Tocqueville's observations arrive at a contradiction at the core of American character, and here he argues that this generalizing impulse actually reflects conflicting tendencies to achieve great success while working as little as possible for it. Americans, he says, "are full of an ambition at once aspiring and relaxed: they would fain succeed brilliantly and at once, but they would be dispensed from great efforts to obtain success" (19). Of course Tocqueville makes gross generalizations in his critique of American generalizing, but his observations nicely suggest how the impulse among literary critics to categorize may emerge from American social structures and historical circumstances.

Perhaps the supreme contradiction for Tocqueville is America's concurrent faith in the independent free-thinking individual and in the majority which supplies "a multitude of ready-made opinions for the use of individuals, who are thus relieved from the necessity of forming opinions on their own" (11). A society of relative equality, he claims, contains "two tendencies; the one leading the mind of every man to untried thoughts, the other inclined to prohibit him from thinking at all" (12). Tocqueville portrays democracy in America as a kind of matrix of tensions, and the more central tension between the will to diversity and the will to conformity, between private rights and responsibility to the public, reverberates in his more specific discussion of democratic poetry.

Tocqueville sees the American focus on immediate, physical gratification and the practical means to this success not so much as a threat to the imagination but a reconfiguration of it "to devise what may be useful, and to represent what is real" (86). So American poets, he claims, have a skepticism toward the supernatural iconography of aristocratic poetry, and this skepticism brings them "back to earth, and confines them to the real and visible world" (86). Similarly, they orient themselves not toward the past, but toward the future: not nostalgic for perfection gone by, the imagination is drawn to "ideas of progression and the indefinite perfectibility of the human race" (88). And at the center of this practical, forward-looking poetry

is “man alone” (88)—not a particular man, for that would undermine the democratic perception of equality, a perception that “allows poets to include [individuals] all in the same imagery, and to take a general survey of the people itself” (89).

All this attention to the groundedness and humanness of American poetry unfolds in Chapter 17, but in the brief chapter that follows, Tocqueville offers further observations that almost contradict what he’s just said. Democratic poets, he notes, “perpetually inflate their imaginations” (94) in hopes of gaining the attention of the masses. Because an American tends to be focused on himself and his own immediate concerns, extraordinary means are required to make him look outward: “When he has been drawn out of his own sphere, therefore, he always expects that some amazing object will be offered to his attention” (93). Tocqueville considers this impulse toward the vast and unlimited so strong as to be dangerous:

I do not fear that poetry of democratic nations will prove too insipid, or that it will fly too near the ground; I rather apprehend that it will be for ever losing itself in the clouds, and that it will range at last to purely imaginary regions. I fear that the productions of democratic poets may often be surcharged with immense and incoherent imagery, with exaggerated descriptions and strange creations; and that the fantastic beings of their brain may sometimes make us regret the world of reality. (94)

So poetry in America, he suggests, conveys a conflicting state, a kind of grounded elevation, an immense particularity. This observation is useful, again, because it articulates the social and historical contingency of American poetry’s contradictory impulses. Even more profoundly, Tocqueville seems to envision Whitman’s poetry fifteen years before the 1955 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Immersed in the particular details of individual selves and yet often impossibly grand in scope, tuned to a vernacular frequency and yet often effusively romantic and florid with optimism, *Leaves of Grass* may be the uncanny manifestation of Tocqueville’s democratic poetry.

Song of My Undoing

Whitman's "Song of Myself" is a 52-section manifesto for unifying opposition, an obsession that emerges no later than line 2: "And what I assume you shall assume..." (188). This merging of the "I" and "you" spins out a trail of binaries the poem tries to bring together by force of the speaker's will. Perhaps the central rhetorical maneuver of the poem has the speaker aligning with one entity or identity, then aligning with its antithesis:

I am of the old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse and stuff'd with the stuff that is fine. (203)

Within the hodgepodge of democratic society, the speaker seems to accept all difference as equally worthy of his attention and adoration. More than just an ethical stance in a pluralistic system, this acceptance, he suggests, is actually a way of thinking, sensing, feeling, living:

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance...
Always a knit of identity, always distinction....

I and this mystery here we stand.

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.

Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn. (190)

The speaker here is overtly ambivalent, always acknowledging bothness, never choosing one side or the other, but he doesn't sound anxious or sarcastic or self-effacing about this ambivalence. On the contrary, the speaker is enthusiastic and confident about the possibility of embracing opposites and even bringing them together into paradoxical unity. The tone is unwaveringly certain, affirmative statements following statements with prayerful, even prescriptive reverberations.

But what is this certainty about? About standing next to "this mystery"? About not choosing between soul and not-soul? About a seen that keeps slipping into the unseen and back again? What kind of certainty is this? Perhaps a kind of negative certainty, akin to Keats's concept of "Negative Capability": "that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (1209). Whitman's persona is certain not that he knows himself and his world as fact but that there is always some absence in the present, that his life is a continuous encounter with contradiction, and that uncertainty is certainly worth embracing because it is the soul of democratic pluralism. Here of course are the lines we've been waiting for, from the penultimate section: "Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself,/ (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" (246).

What might begin as a moment of vulnerability and doubt turns into an assertive gesture verging on arrogant. This dynamic, this performing of negative certainty, propels much of the poem and I suspect has helped give it the reputation as a quintessential American poem. Readers today might find themselves a bit skeptical, embarrassed by its sentimental optimism, but the poem keeps speaking to those contradictions individuals keep playing out in American democracy. If much American poetry still performs this negative certainty, it often does so with a greater emphasis on the "negative." Whereas Whitman's persona exudes great hope about the self's ability to contain the contradictory elements, contemporary American poetry is more likely to destabilize or ironize or call more attention to the constructedness of that hope.

The final section almost allows the uncertainty to overwhelm the self (“I too am untranslatable”), and in this it is prescient, perhaps almost falling toward postmodernism. After so much singing of the salient self throughout the poem, section 52 tends more toward elusiveness, unknowingness:

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean...

If the speaker comes dangerously close to oblivion here, he doesn't lose himself entirely. The poem's final line almost returns to more solid footing: “I stop somewhere waiting for you” (247). And yet that vague “somewhere” echoes menacingly in the silent aftermath.

You Can't Say It That Way Any More

Whitman wrote poems in a specific time and place, and although he performs those contradictions that still pervade the American socioeconomic system, you can't say it that way any more. Here's how Ron Padgett says it in a poem called “Embraceable You”:

I don't mind Walt Whitman's saying
“I contain multitudes,” in fact I like it,
but all I can imagine myself saying is
“I contain a sandwich and some coffee and a throb.”

Maybe I should throw my arms out and sing,
“Oh, grab hold of everything and hug tight!
Then clouds, books, barometer, eyes wider
and wider, come crashing through
and leave me shattered on the floor,
a mess of jolly jumping molecules!” (18)

It takes this poem ten lines to illuminate what’s happened to the self in American poetry in the last century and a half. The speaker sets himself apart from Whitman, not so much as an adversary, but as a self-effacing wise-ass who can’t quite imagine making such bold claims for wholeness and unity and fulfillment. Even when the speaker considers the possibility of embracing the vastness of America, it slips away and leaves our fragile subject a fragmented mess.

If Whitman’s self asserted un-ironical optimism for unifying the contradictions, what is Padgett’s self up to? It would be hard to read despair in this poem, or pessimism—perhaps a slight sarcasm directed at Whitman’s Romantic notions. Yet the poem becomes almost Whitmanesque in its closing exclamatory effusiveness, embracing not so much the self as the self’s inability to be fully embraced.

The jolly joy of this poem is how it calls attention to the artifice of that subject but never disowns that subject. The poem’s persona is always present, but that presence is disrupted by self-effacing humor, and images of arbitrariness and chaos. Along with the wry humor, a friendly nostalgia for Whitman’s innocence colors the first half of the poem, so while Padgett can’t quite say it that way anymore, he still acts out the endless negotiations between the oppositions: he can’t quite let go of the hope for a comforting wholeness, even while exposing our chaotic contingency and uncertainty, and there is also some comfort, even joy, in that letting go of the need for complete control and unity.

This shift—from Whitman’s way of performing contradictions by leaning toward an ideal, fully-realized self to Padgett’s way of leaning more toward a subversive, fragmented self—no doubt has many conditions and causes, but one useful historical analogy is a certain shift in dominant social values in the mid twentieth century. Historical narratives often tell us that in the early twentieth century, conformity prevailed with the promise of a standardized American dream for everyone—fueled by World Wars and industrial growth, manifested in patriotism and new technologies of mass production, a post-Depression social safety net and institutionalization of community activities, and pressure for ethnic assimilation and the devaluation of difference. In the late 50s and 60s, the narrative shifts: the counterculture revolution rose up as many people rejected that homogenous American dream, embracing nonconformity and the disruption of traditional ideals.

This version of the story is too simple, of course, because those competing sets of values may not have been as contrary and transparent as they appear. In other words, nonconformity and conformity can be very slippery concepts, turning out to be the same thing, describing the same social practice, a point that Thomas Frank has made in his attempts to deflate and demystify the revered status of hip, alternative culture, particularly in the magazine he edits, *The Baffler* ("The Journal That Blunts the Cutting Edge"), and in his first book, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. Frank's historical account argues that notions of rebellion against order and conformity were already taking root in the business of advertising in the 50s, and by the mid 60s—well before the famous counterculture revolution—ads commonly communicated anti-establishment (even anti-commercial) messages. These invitations to be a nonconforming radical and break away from consumer predictability, like “Join the Dodge Rebellion,” were early attempts to promote mass consumption by appearing to rail against it. “The Sixties are more than the homeland of hip,” Frank says, “they are a commercial template for our times, a historical prototype for the construction of cultural

machines that transform alienation and despair into consent” (235). By now this is a familiar story—the collapsing of the alternative/mainstream cultural wall is nearly as widely acknowledged as the collapsing of the Berlin wall. Mass marketing of cutting edge fashions is not new, but that turnover process often seems to have accelerated in recent years to the point of disappearing from view. Perhaps the wall has always been an illusion, driving America's historical hunger for progress by creating competition between wild pioneering individualism and consensus of the majority, as Tocqueville suggested over a century and a half ago.

I think the first time I (unwillingly) recognized that nonconformity can be a commodity was 1991, the year Nirvana's *Nevermind* reached number one on Billboard's music chart. Before then, I'd been adamant about drawing strong lines between authentic, artful rock music and the kind that sells out to corporate demands and popular tastes. For much of the 80s, my friends and I had been passionately involved in what we called "indie rock," the more nuanced offspring of 70s punk rock that nonetheless retained a fierce attachment to its independent, non-commercial status. Of course, this wasn't the first time that young people saw themselves defending the last true space for creativity and resistance, but that didn't stop us from believing we were the chosen ones. When one of our favorite indie bands—Nirvana—very suddenly became the most popular, bestselling band in the country, however, we became very disoriented. Maybe even ashamed. Certainly not proud that our music had found a broad audience. It might've been easy enough to dismiss Nirvana for having sold out, but I think we knew that some tectonic shift in the cultural landscape had occurred, and we'd never be the same again.

It turns out that Nirvana's success was not really unique, and that my peers and I were not victims of an entirely new threat to our rebel status, because rebellion has always been for sale. Our historical moment, however, is not the same as it was a century ago. As Frank suggests, capitalism no longer waits for attractive new rebellions to come along to then turn into

commodities; capitalism increasingly creates those rebellions, which means there's no difference between those rebellions and the commodity form.

A Poetics of Advertising

Cultural historian, Jackson Lears, agrees with Frank that that the advertising industry in the 60s embraced nonconformity as a marketing tool, but Lears also reminds us that advertising has always appealed to contradictory desires. In *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*, he notes that commerce has long been associated with what he calls an “animistic sensibility” (9), that impulse toward play, fantasy, magic, imagination, pleasure, and the carnivalesque. Consumer goods have for centuries promised not only transcendence from predictability and drudgery, but a magical access to exotic realms of mystery and sensuality, where identity can be transformed again and again. In early twentieth century America, however, with the rise of mass consumption, a lingering distrust of deceptive commercial practices of the nineteenth century, and a firmly rooted Protestant moral code that warned against excess and hedonism, advertisements increasingly harnessed a “rhetoric of control” (10) that emphasized managerial order, scientific objectivity, technological progress, personal efficiency, and standardization. Nonetheless, Lears argues, a rhetoric of magical abundance continued to complement that rhetoric of control, and by the 1950s, and especially in the 1960s, “a carnivalesque revival” (256) emerged in the advertising business.

This revival was partly an attempt by Madison Avenue to confront a growing popular dissent against the bland consumerism of the years following World War II. As Lears points out, “The children who were naming Lassie’s puppies and dragging their parents to the TV store so they could get a Sylvania Space Ranger kit were also reading *Mad* magazine, founded in 1952.” *Mad*, of course, was devoted to satirizing and ridiculing all kinds of cultural icons, but it

unleashed particularly vicious venom against well known advertisements and the marketing industry in general. Lears gives an example of this biting humor from Mad's "Madison Avenue Primer," published in 1957, and it's worth noting that this piece of social critique can also be called a poem.

See the man.
He does advertising work.
He is called an "ad-man."
See his funny tight suit.
See his funny haircut.
Hear his funny stomach turn.
Churn, churn, churn.
The ad-man has a funny ulcer.
Most ad-men have funny ulcers.
But then, some ad-men are lucky.
They do not have funny ulcers.
They have funny high blood pressure. (257)

Using the tone of an early childhood reader, this text pokes fun at the figure of the "ad-man" for the stress and anxiety that manifests both in his "tight" external appearance and in his bad internal health. This implicit argument is that ad-men live in contradiction, looking productive and tidy on the outside, and yet consumed by ulcers and high blood pressure on the inside. A further implication is that the work of ad-men is defined by a similar hypocrisy—the deliberate attempt to fool consumers into believing that what's unhealthy, wasteful, and poorly made, is actually healthy, necessary, and well-made.

If we read the "Madison Avenue Primer" as a poem—with its verse lines, self-consciously sing-songy rhythms, and word play (e.g. the repetition of "funny")—then we can also say that the pleasure of reading this poem does not derive from its being an example of literary excellence. In fact, in some sense this poem strives to be bad, mimicking not only the unsophisticated speech of a primer for children but also the annoying repetitions of advertising jingles. The pleasure of this poem derives not from how it overcomes the triteness of popular speech and consumer culture, but how it indulges in that triteness and gives it just enough ironic

twist that readers get a humorous critical distance from the triteness. The poem is fueled not by poetic eloquence but by sharp satire and cultural critique.

Another method *Mad* used to ridicule the advertising world, Lears points out, was to parody actual ads for brand name products. For example, “Melvin Furd, whose teeth have all been knocked out in a fight, endorsing Crust Gumpaste, which coats the gums with ‘a hard, white enamel finish’” (257). Of course, what’s provocative about this parody is not just that it turns the American obsession with oral hygiene on its head, but it does so by conjuring an iconic brand name, Crest Toothpaste, and while changing only a few letters, transforms it into a nightmarish version of itself. The figure of “Crust Gumpaste” is powerful because it’s so close in sound and structure to “Crest Toothpaste,” and yet it turns that iconic name into a ridiculous monster—it’s a terrifyingly funny ghost of that familiar brand. As in the “Madison Avenue Primer,” there’s a poetic skill and grace in this parodic inversion, a highly nuanced balancing of sameness and difference, as well as a remarkable efficiency and concision. Again, this poetic force comes not from traditional notions of poetic eloquence or beauty; on the contrary, “Crust Gumpaste” is interesting as poetry because it’s ugly, uncivilized, and bad.

The Topps Company took this mode of advertising parody and cleverly turned it into a successful consumer product called Wacky Packages. I remember becoming somewhat obsessed with these trading card stickers myself sometime in the 70s, proudly affixing them on everything from my school notebooks to the furniture in my bedroom. Each sticker presented a colorful cartoon version of a familiar brand transformed into its horrifying yet hilarious doppelganger. A can of dog food called “Alpoo,” for example, depicts a brainless canine sniffing a bowl of fecal matter, along with a caption saying “Leftover Dinner for Dumb Dogs.” Many Wacky Packages had an abject or violent quality, using shock and revulsion to propel the humor; for example, a well-known brand of bandages is transformed into “Band-Ache,” whose primary selling point is that it “strips off skin” (and the gory, bloody image on the box shows the results). Often the

Wacky Packages parodies not only ridicule the consumer product itself, but also wage a larger social or political critique. “Slum Maid Raisins” depicts a wretched and impoverished woman carrying a bountiful tray of garbage. A brand of lunch meat called “Oscar the Mayor” depicts a pontificating politician giving a campaign speech above a banner that says, “Lots of Baloney,” a product that has been “Approved by the Liar’s Club.”

Perhaps my favorite of these Wacky Packages is “Extra Strong Commie Cleanser,” whose can shows a demented, peace-sign waving Uncle Sam above a caption that reads, “Gets rid of Reds, Pinkos, Hippies, Yippies & Flippies.” With its overt reference to mid-twentieth century paranoia about the communist threat, this parody of the household cleaner, Comet, overtly lampoons American conformity, but all Wacky Packages do similar work by implicitly deriding a consumer culture fueled by fear-based consensus. Each parody calls attention to some sacred consumer value—such as thrift, cleanliness, or patriotism—and then comically undercuts that value, showing how it’s not natural and inevitable but part of a marketing scheme meant to dupe the consuming public. It’s important to note, however, that this critique of consumerism is always embedded in humor, artful cartoon imagery, and poetic wordplay. As a suburban kid growing up in the 70s, I was not interested in being a social critic, nor was I directly influenced by the 60s counterculture, but I did find those Wacky Packages totally compelling, and I wanted the world to see that I liked them. For me and probably for many kids, displaying those stickers was a form of play—an extension of the play of images and text on the stickers themselves. For a child, play is worthwhile for its own sake, because it’s fun, but in retrospect I see that my play often involved undermining powerful icons and institutions, making fun of them, and that the undermining was itself a form of power. In other words, I did not identify myself as a rebel, but I often performed acts of rebellion in my childhood play.

My Sixth Grade Play

Even more vivid in my advertising memory than my relationship with Wacky Packages was a piece of theater my sixth-grade class performed in front of our entire elementary school, along with faculty, parents, and other visitors. It was 1977, and Ms. Yates—our ancient but affable teacher—announced one day that we’d soon start planning our big year-end play. Then she asked a stunningly democratic question: “what would you like to do?” This was not just a rhetorical question, it turned out—she wasn’t just tricking us into thinking we were using our free will, only to arrive at some stale drama of her own choosing. No, she was really asking this room full of eleven-year-olds to generate a plan for the play.

“Let’s do TV!!” was the first and only suggestion, booming from the mouth of the popular Mike Galus, and the whole room erupted with a chorus of “Yeah!!” And that was it. Ms. Yates smiled at the overwhelming mandate and said, “Okay, let’s do TV.”

To what extent we really had choice in this little democratic experiment is a tricky matter. For one thing, Mike Galus was a pistol-mouthed class-clown whose opinions generally received lop-sided attention. More importantly, TV occupied an enormous space in the lives of just about every kid in that room. Besides sleeping and attending school, watching TV was likely our main activity. Even had we taken more time to deliberate that day, I can’t even imagine what other options we might have given ourselves. Likewise, if my mother had asked my brother and me what we wanted for dinner that night, I guarantee we would have voted unanimously to get fastfood from McDonald’s. Would those votes really have been freely cast?

As I remember it, the sixth-grade play was hugely successful. We assembled a number of skits based on popular TV shows of the day, including *Happy Days*, starring of course Mike Galus as The Fonz. The real energy of our performance, however, came from the commercials that we presented between the shows—as if our audience were watching an evening of prime time viewing. As a class, I remember, we settled on a handful of our favorite commercials to

perform, and they were certainly not the conventional, hard-sell kind. We were drawn to the ones with humor and entertainment, the ones that downplayed the product while playing up characters, narratives, humor, unexpected twists, and absurdity.

Among the weirdest and funniest ad campaigns at that time was for York Peppermint Patty. These spots would feature a series of oddball characters offering extreme testimonials about their devotion to this candy product. We had already witnessed Kristen Karzewski, easily the most animated girl in our class, mimic one of these York Peppermint Patty freaks in the lunch room and on the playground, so she was immediately and unanimously made the star of our re-enactment. Like all of us, Kristen was a thoroughly white suburbanite, but in our play, in front of a packed auditorium, she became an effusive black woman with bugged out eyes and a high-pitched streetwise dialect, proclaiming orgasmically: “When I eat a York Peppermint Patty I get the sensation of being in the forest and the only thing I hear honneeeeeey [here the character slaps her knee with dramatic flair] is the dew dropping off the cool grrreeeeeeeeeeen leaves!!!” Kristen nailed the performance, and the entire audience broke out into loud, knowing laughter. Clearly this York Peppermint Patty ad had been made before the era of political correctness and multiculturalism, because no one in that room appeared to be offended by the racial stereotyping. I think the humor, however, was fueled less by racism than by a certain consumer cultural awareness. In other words, we may have been partly laughing at a histrionic black woman and her excessive, uncivilized love for a circle of chocolate-covered sugar, but more directly, we were laughing at the whole advertising industry, and in particular the technique of real-life consumer testimonials.

My only role in that sixth-grade play turned out to be Mikey from the famous Life Cereal commercial, and even this didn't require me to say anything. You may recall, after the older kids argue about who's going to try the new cereal, one of them declares: “Hey, let's get Mikey!” Mikey is supposed to hate everything, but Life transcends the severe limits of his taste. So in my

performance I poked tentatively with a spoon inside the bowl, then after the first successful crunch, dove back in more eagerly to wolf down the yummy squares. The older kids gazed on incredulously, then one of them gasped, “He likes it!! Hey Mikey!!!” Our skit received lots of giggles followed by all-out guffaws after that familiar final line.

Of course, this commercial, as it aired on TV, is supposed to be funny, and that humor comes from the way it plays with expectations and power dynamics. On one hand, Mikey’s power is limited because he’s the younger kid, painfully shy, vulnerable in his extreme cuteness, who can be manipulated and turned into a lab rat by the mean older kids. But Mikey also has the power of discriminating taste—“he hates everything”—which suggests that he’s not duped by mainstream values and cereals for the masses. Whether Mikey’s finicky palate is snobbish or radical, his outsider status has a certain power that’s especially affirmed at the end, when he decides that Life is indeed worthy of his high standards. The quick transformation of Mickey from a powerless victim to powerful taste-maker, while the older kids watch with bewilderment and dismay, is the primary narrative twist that made this commercial so successful. Moreover, because this spot gives so much attention to that narrative, to characters, plot, tension, and humor, it diminishes the presence of the commodity itself, which means that the commercial seems less interested in forcing viewers to purchase Life cereal than providing them with the gift of entertainment and a smile.

Both the Life and the York Peppermint Patty commercials offer modest challenges to common expectations about authority and advertising, and they do so with humor. As a sixth-grade class, however, we did not simply show film clips of these commercials; we adapted them for the stage, we changed and exaggerated them. What were we doing to these ads, and why? I mean, commercials are supposed to be a burden, an unpleasant experience that we accept in exchange for televised entertainment? Why would a bunch of sixth-graders choose to impose that ugliness on its school play? I think that we were partly celebrating these commercials, because we

knew that they were doing something differently than the more predictable, hard-sell ads in TV land. We knew that they were speaking to us, trying to make us laugh, trying not to take themselves so seriously. On the other hand, we were adding some playful satire to the satirical edge these commercials already had. We certainly were not explicitly critiquing them, but we were performing them with a slight critical distance. We were asserting some control over them, remaking them through our own aesthetic vision while also feeding off their cultural power—an ambivalent stance not unlike the one Andy Warhol took toward consumerism in his treatments of packaging for Campbell's soup or Brillo pads.

Interlude 5.1

The Ghost of My Candy

*When I eat a York Peppermint Patty
I get the sensation of being in a forest
and the only thing I hear, honey,
is the dew dropping off the cool green leaves.*

When I sleep on your ass cheek
I get the sensation of being in therapy
and the only thing I can't talk about
is how slowly my parents destroyed each other.

When I meet your father carrying a sandbag,
I get the sense that he wants to stop the river
and the only thing that will distract him
is the sound of my commercial voice.

When you want to buy something round and sweet
I hope you decide to want my chocolate brain
and the only place to get some, at 3 a.m.,
is my warm red convenience store.

When I no longer hear the dew say later on,
I'll know that you've made a river of it
and the only forest worth being, honey,
is the tree that I can't touch.

Movement 5.1

Towards a New Politics of Poetics

Ozzy Osbourne's Worst Nightmare

When Jackson Lears argues that the advertising business experienced “a carnivalesque revival” in the 60s, this means in part that advertisements themselves start to take on the kind of playfully parodic energy of Wacky Packages, my sixth-grade play, and Warhol’s art. In other words, as the counterculture emerges as a mainstream value and public skepticism of advertising becomes more widespread, ads themselves become more skilled at poking fun at the ethos of advertising, even appearing to take a stance against it while nonetheless pitching a product.

Consider what has happened to TV advertising in recent decades. When I was growing up in the 70s and 80s, many commercials associated their products with social stability and traditional values. They were often serious, sincere, direct attempts to say that a product was the best, the most popular, the most respected, the most effective. A major car maker had a memorable ad campaign connecting its brand to the most sacred symbols of American culture: “Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet.” A well-known peanut-butter brand claimed that “Choosy mothers choose Jif,” at once affirming the excellence of the product’s quality and the mothers who purchase it. An insurance company presented itself as the reliable folks who live next door: “And like a good neighbor, State Farm is there.” One of the most common pitches for a product making health claims was that it had been recommended by “4 out of 5 doctors,” a direct attempt to profit from the appearance of scientific research and the strong social status of doctors.

Along with these more conservative TV ads were the ones that flirted more with rebellion, trying to appeal to the defiant, free-spirited impulses of consumers. Many of these ads were humorous, slightly irreverent, emphasizing an entertaining story more than the product itself. A famous spot for Parkay margarine starred a talking tub of margarine who kept calling itself “butter” in a deadpan tone; meanwhile, Chiffon margarine’s ad cleverly claimed their product tasted so buttery, it even duped “mother nature,” who in turn lashed out with a thunderous warning: “It’s not nice to fool mother nature!” Both of these margarine commercials urged consumers to identify with the rebel status of something that pretends to be what it’s not, poking fun at the tired predictability of what’s actually real. An iconic ad campaign for Charmin toilet paper told us repeatedly that this product was so soft and pleasurable to touch, it caused shoppers to become crazed with the need to squeeze it, despite the curmudgeonly Mr. Whipple’s endless scoldings: “Please don’t squeeze the Charmin.” Mr. Whipple represents the stiff, stodgy restraint of an older generation brought up on depression-era deprivation and good Christian modesty, but Charmin charmed the ladies every time, allowing them to fulfill their hedonistic desires. The Life cereal and York Peppermint Patty commercials that my sixth-grade class performed also fit into this category of the mildly irreverent.

All of these spots that used humor and storytelling to challenge convention in small ways were precursors to the advertising campaigns of today. These techniques are so prevalent now that it’s almost shocking to encounter a TV commercial that simply holds up a product and makes a straightforward pitch for it. In the twenty-first century, a kind of cool, clever anti-advertising has saturated the mediascape. Ads do just about everything except directly advertise what’s for sale. They tell stories, they entertain, they make us emote, they scare us and make us laugh, they give us startling images, often visual collages of images that have little logical connection but produce powerful effects through metaphor. The design of these ads is often amazingly complex and sophisticated, moving quickly through a richly layered experience, referring to the commodity

only in the most elliptical ways. Most of all, these ads are creative, they "think outside the box," they're poetic, and they're made with many of the same skills a student will likely practice in a Creative Writing course.

While a standard first-year Composition course typically emphasizes a dry, practical, thesis-driven expository writing whose organization is linear and logical (as in the infamous five-paragraph essay format), Creative Writing courses allow students to practice storytelling, character development, manipulations of time and space, unconventional transitions, nonlinear organization, metaphorical or associative thinking, unpredictable uses of language, nonrealistic depictions of experience—in other words, the same qualities that have become central to advertising.

Nonrealism, in particular, is now a key mark of hip, sophisticated advertising, especially the kind of nonrealism presented with new special effects. Rather than boring consumers with another predictable spokesperson endorsing a product, new commercials might wield computer-generated talking animals or babies making provocative, humorous comments. The nonrealism is often humorous, but it also often has a dark, violent edge to it. After decades of sincere, sing-songy pitches to consumers, urging them to them to "have it your way," Burger King has recently turned severely satirical with ads showing their own corporate mascot, the Burger King, in various bizarre and not so regal situations; in one of these spots the King is chased down a busy city sidewalk by cops for committing the crime of "reverse pickpocketing," then he swerves into the street where he is hit by a speeding taxi cab. Making a similar move, a recent Pepsi commercial features pop icon Justin Timberlake, although instead of proclaiming his love for this brand of cola, he's shown being swept away from his friends by some unseen force, carried through a cityscape, over a tall building, through a river, across a field during a soccer match, down a suburban street where the unseen force rams his groin into a mailbox post several times, after which his entire torso flies into and dislodges an open car door, which he then uses as a kind of bobsled to thread through a traffic jammed intersection, after which he lands in a classy backyard where a pretty, bikini-clad teenage

girl sucks Pepsi through a drinking straw, and we realize that this girl has literally sucked JT to this very spot, she has caused the unseen force to deliver this gorgeous hunk of man, with the help of Pepsi. Never does JT explicitly endorse Pepsi or make anything like a serious product pitch; instead he is the star of very entertaining piece of absurdity made possible by special effects and some amazingly creative advertisers.

Pepsi put out another noteworthy commercial several years ago for a different product called Pepsi Twist—their standard cola with an added twist of lemon flavor. Rock legend Ozzy Osbourne stars in this spot, parlaying his resurrected fame from *The Osbournes*, the reality-based TV show about his family. In the commercial Ozzy is stumbling around a kitchen in his typical muttering stupor, apparently looking for something to consume, when his children appear holding cans of Pepsi. But it turns out that these cans are disguised: zippers become visible on them and the Osbourne kids unzip the old familiar and reveal the wild new alternative, Pepsi Twist. Then things get even weirder—suddenly the kids appear to unzip themselves, beginning with their faces. Underneath their surface identities appear two TV icons from the 1970s, Donnie and Marie Osmond, the epitome of clean wholesome entertainment—stark contrast to Ozzy’s morbid and crazed reputation, although the similar off-rhyme sound of “Osmond” and “Osbourne” has a nicely poetic association. Donnie and Marie leap into their trademark theme song that many Americans remember them by: “I’m a little bit country, I’m a little bit rock and roll...” By now Ozzy is about to blow the only fuse in his brain that hasn’t already blown, and then we are suddenly transported to Ozzy’s bed, where he seems to be just waking from a terrible nightmare. For a second we think that Ozzy has just been dreaming the preceding events, but as he reaches for the comfort of his beloved, instead of his wife, it’s Florence Henderson who turns to him. That’s right, the matriarch of *The Brady Bunch*, another icon of safe mainstream suburban TV from the 70s.

The message of this commercial—that Pepsi Twist is very hip and savvy and therefore you should drink it—might have been communicated by bashing The Osmonds and Henderson

and deifying the bad-boy Ozzy, but that would apparently be too easy. The real unexpected “twist” is that the great losers and geeks from the recent history of hip are suddenly empowered to haunt Ozzy’s dreamscape. Pepsi Twist knows that it’s cooler to celebrate the kitsch from our past with bladed humor than to bash it overtly, just as it knows that even cooler than Ozzy himself is his worst nightmare—being the patriarch of a whitebread conformists. The way this spot plays with American social categories is clever and complex: mainstream culture infiltrates counterculture, counterculture undermines itself to be even more acutely counter, and no one comes away clean as authentic cultural icon or even spokesperson for the product. The heroes of this commercial turn out to be the product itself and the audience. Pepsi Twist is so cool that it barely needs to appear in its own ad, and it seems to be the generative force behind all the outrageously subversive activity. The audience is so cool that we understand how cool Pepsi Twist is without being assaulted with an overt pitch. We understand all the sly cultural references and participate in the subversive play, feeling like insiders, engaged in a kind of cultural gossip with Pepsi Twist, and laughing all the way. The commercial is not about the product so much as the relationship between product and audience. What we find attractive in Pepsi Twist is what we want to find attractive in ourselves—in this case, the ability to keep up with the ongoing performance of social contradictions.

The Advertising of Poetry

If my sixth-grade play called a little satirical attention to the artifice of our favorite TV moments, this Pepsi Twist commercial amplifies that attention significantly. Both take iconic cultural references and manipulate them, recontextualize them, to create powerful effects for viewers. Poetry and other art forms often use the same kinds of techniques, and I think contemporary American poetry is often implicitly aware that it is competing with advertising and marketing. In other words, the poetry of recent years cannot simply take an oppositional stance against consumer culture because consumerism increasingly absorbs that kind of opposition,

actually using anti-advertising techniques in advertisements themselves. Andy Warhol satirized some stable consumer icons of the twentieth century, but how could an artist today satirize Pepsi Twist after seeing that commercial?

Harryette Mullen's poetry confronts popular and consumer culture directly, particularly in her 2002 volume, *Sleeping with the Dictionary*. As a whole, this book tastes like a very strange soup, blending cool hip-hop rhythms and innocent sing-songy child-speak, savvy marketing propaganda and brain-dead clichés from every corner of the mediascape. A number of poems make reference to advertising slogans or brand names, but Mullen's stance toward this detritus of consumerism is complex and ambiguous.

Here's a prose-poem called "Dim Lady" for example,

My honeybunch's peepers are nothing like neon. Today's special at Red Lobster is redder than her kisser. If Liquid Paper is white, her racks are institutional beige. If her mop were Slinkys, dishwater Slinkys would grow on her noggin. I have seen table-cloths in Shakey's Pizza Parlors, red and white, but no such picnic colors do I see in her mug. And in some minty-fresh mouthwashes there is more sweetness than in the garlic breeze my main squeeze wheezes. I love to hear her rap, yet I'm aware that Muzak has a hipper beat. I don't know any Marilyn Monroes. My ball and chain is plain from head to toe. And yet, by gosh, my scrumptious Twinkie has as much sex appeal for me as any lanky model or platinum movie idol who's hyped beyond belief. (20)

This is a kind of negative love poem in which the speaker proclaims a litany of ways his beloved doesn't measure up to the fancy, glittery commodities of this world. We take the speaker to be a persona—more cartoon-like and exaggerated than realistic, not expressing the views or experiences of Mullen herself, not even very likeable or credible as a personality. Instead, the speaker's voice exudes an annoying, complaining arrogance, the sound of someone who judges

according to rigid standards, perhaps a man with a demeaning attitude toward women, a man who relies on stock sexist phrases like “main squeeze” and “ball and chain.”

There’s another dominant quality to this speaker, however; he uses language in highly unusual, metaphorical, musical ways. This paragraph produces extreme sound collisions and repetitions, through puns and other wordplay, through the dense layers of alliteration, assonance, consonance, and internal rhymes. Despite the vapid, oppressive qualities of the voice, it has a playful, joyful bounce, a celebratory verve, and it’s trying to excite readers to join in this fetishization of commodities. So this speaker celebrates the poetic possibilities of language, and that celebration is tied directly to a series of trademarked brands, all of them capitalized to highlight their status as familiar, revered, and privately-owned icons: Red Lobster, Liquid Paper, Slinkys, Shakey’s Pizza Parlor, Muzak, and Twinkies. These brand names are central to the linguistic energy of this poem; they are the bright sparks around which the pyrotechnical sounds and rhythms are built in every sentence.

If we believe that this speaker has some authority, then we can certainly say that this poem shows great devotion to the material and poetic beauty of commodities. Moreover, it acts out Marx’s famous theory of fetishism, which proposes that a commodity seems at first to be “a very trivial thing, and easily understood,” but it turns out to be “a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (319). In other words, commodities can provoke a religious passion in consumers, and that’s exactly what they do in Mullen’s poem, “Dim Lady.” Mullen’s speaker has a passion that’s not only metaphysical/theological but also erotic/romantic, and this passion generates a wild, irrational, absurd dynamic throughout the poem. Marx gives an example of this irrational value in a passage that is itself like a prose poem:

The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not

only stands with its feet on the ground, but in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” ever was. (320)

Here Marx personifies the table, giving it the ability to stand (on both feet and head) and to think grotesque/wonderful ideas, and this human quality is linked to its transcendence. The table is not simply an object, not just a wooden thing, but a force that can access a god-like power, that can instill in consumers a passionate devotion, the kind of devotion felt for other humans who have exceptional god-like qualities. To purchase a commodity, then, is not simply to buy something of use, but to buy something that transcends the very notion of usefulness, offering consumers a ticket to another world so amazing that mundane matters of function and utility are irrelevant. This is a huge promise for a commodity to make, but this is precisely the promise that drives consumerism by ceaselessly expanding consumer desire.

The desire for transcendence also drives Mullen’s poem, “Dim Lady,” in that the speaker is always looking beyond his beloved to find fulfillment in the promise of a brand name. Like Marx’s curious table, each commodity in Mullen’s poem suggests a human quality, and the speaker keeps finding this quality more desirable than the one offered by his “honeybunch” (e.g. Red Lobster is redder, Liquid Paper is whiter). The writings above by both Marx and Mullen have a satirical edge, performing the commodity/consumer to the fullest while at the same time mocking them. We know that Marx’s table example is set in the context of a larger theoretical critique of capitalism, and his vehement stance against the commodity form is not ambiguous. Mullen’s poem is less easily fixed, because even if we can dismiss the speaker’s overt enthusiasm for brand names as dramatic irony, knowing that the poem really means to ridicule them, we still have to concede that the poem is also celebrating the poetic, linguistic, and rhythmic potential of those brand names. It’s as if the poem is saying, “Yes, these commodities can make us greedy,

mean, and stupid, but they're also playful and fun, they can manipulate meaning and language in interesting ways, and they make great material for poetry."

The end of "Dim Lady" adds more ambiguity to the overall reading. The speaker continues to diminish his beloved, suggesting that she's no Marilyn Monroe, and "plain from head to toe," and yet the poem's argument appears to take a sudden turn here: "And yet, by gosh, my scrumptious Twinkie has as much sex appeal for me as any lanky model or platinum movie idol who's hyped beyond belief." Has the speaker's beloved "ball and chain" become synonymous with a "scrumptious Twinkie" whose "sex appeal" is equal to that of Hollywood starlets? Or has the speaker rejected both his beloved and those Marilyn Monroes in favor of a simply exquisite cream-filled tube of golden cake? Whichever interpretation sounds more convincing, it's clear that the commodities have won the speaker's affections, and furthermore, the speaker does show some sense of discrimination, not simply willing to be seduced by an over-hyped model/idol. The speaker almost suggests that a Twinkie has more substance and reality than the typical empty cultural icon, a more compelling kind of beauty. Thus, the brand names have a special status in the poem, a transcendent status, having both a human and a super-human appeal.

In other words, the poem is a kind of advertisement for the commodities, selling their virtues and beauty to the reader/consumer. The poem is an advertisement, but what about that humor, what about that undercurrent of irony and satire? The poem is also a performance of a commercial that's actually questioning its own authenticity. This impulse, however, doesn't separate it fundamentally from many advertisements that also question their own authenticity? The Pepsi Twist spot featuring Ozzy Osbourne pokes fun at the social ideals generated by the cultural machine of television-land, whether they appear to be oriented toward conformity or rebellion, and this satirical stance positions it against consumerism while at the same time promoting consumerism.

So the commercial and the poem have much in common. Both can be read as texts with similar formal elements at work. Both texts call on some surrealism or absurdity, playing an inviting familiarity against a disturbing strangeness. Both texts make logical leaps we might find in dreams. Both texts juxtapose images in surprising ways, disrupting how we normally expect those images to be arranged. Both texts perform contradictions in the American marketplace and democracy without asserting an overt, conclusive message about them. Both texts cultivate a self-reflexive awareness, not taking themselves too seriously, keeping a sly distance from what they say and do, implicitly accepting that language is slippery, that cultural desires are artificially constructed.

As the creative economy expands and the creative ethos becomes dominant, as “thinking outside the box” becomes a middlebrow virtue and value, advertising becomes more like poetry, and poetry becomes more like advertising. Advertising needs poetry’s ability to make an audience feel unstable enough to keep seeing new things in the text; poetry needs advertising’s ability to make an audience feel stable enough to identify with the commodity. A poem like “Dim Lady” is implicitly aware that it cannot distinguish itself from a consumer system simply by subverting it, because that system already anticipates and enacts its own self-subversion well in advance. Mullen and her audience know that celebrating and plumbing the poetics of brand names can be more provocative than dismissing those brands. As Thomas Frank asserts, advertisers have grown increasingly skilled at disguising conformity as nonconformity, at making ads seem like critiques of the very mass consumerism it actually promotes. For Pepsi Twist, these techniques are more subtle than simply lampooning prime-time TV stars of the past, because audiences understand that nonconformity is cheap, that the new nonconformity needs to be able to laugh at nonconformity and sometimes even embrace conformity.

Biopower & Biopoetics, or, Is This A Political Poem?

I'm saying here that poems and ads have more in common than is often acknowledged, but does this mean that they have become the same thing? Can American poetry do something other than blindly reproduce acquisitive, oppressive capitalism and democracy? In other words, can American poetry be politically engaged, politically active? It can, I think, but the political poem needs to be aware that its own poetic techniques can be used in advertisements and other dominant social forms. In other words, the political poem can no longer take a directly oppositional stance against the dominant system, or that opposition cannot claim a pure space outside the system.

The stereotypical political poem, the kind often dismissed by those who say they love literature for its own sake (i.e. its aesthetic value), makes very clear what it is against: it is anti-war, anti-capitalism, anti-discrimination, anti-pollution, etc. This kind of poem is often dismissed because it projects an overt message, and this message seems to override concern for poetic form and technique. This poem is reduced to predictable slogans: war is bad, bad people are bad, badness is bad. So pervasive is this stereotype that the term "political poetry" has become nearly synonymous with "trite self-righteousness," and very few poets these days are willing to claim that they write it.

All the more surprising that a well-regarded poetry press, Wave Books, recently published an anthology called: *State of the Union: 50 Political Poems*. Among the most notable features of this anthology is that it offers readers no introductory material, no statement of political poetics, no theoretical or historical perspective on political poetry, no definition or explanation of what political poetry is or should be, not even a back-cover blurb giving the slightest hint of context for the anthology. Few of the fifty writers included in the anthology are considered political poets in the conventional sense, and many of them—such as John Ashbery, James Tate, Mary Ruefle, and Noelle Kocot—are often considered apolitical, interested primarily in creating strange and

humorous effects with language. The poems included generally make at least one reference to the American political system or to some specific social injustice, but they do not proclaim an overt, direct message, or if they do so, that message is set within a playful context.

Many of the poems digress away from the political reference, as if anxious about making the poem “about” that one issue; instead the political reference becomes part of a larger composition of poetic materials, another item for the mind of the speaker to confront and process. A short poem called “This,” by Michael Palmer, works in this mode:

This perfect half-moon
of lies in the capital

Crooks and fools in power what’s new
and our search has begun for signs of spring

Maybe those two bluebirds
flashing past the hawthorn yesterday

Against that, the jangle of a spoon in cup
and a child this day swept out to sea

Here the opening natural image, a nod to the “perfect” simple purity of the non-human, morphs into a bitter allusion to corruption in the seat of government, which then digresses to another natural image, a lyrical yearning for spring optimism, which then digresses again to a final couplet of images that end the poem with an air of despair, suggesting that child-like hope is inevitably lost in a vast confusion that we can’t control or understand. The overtly political content only takes up two of the eight lines, and although those lines are arguably the poem’s center of gravity, the other images provide a crucial dynamic of tension and contradiction. If the poem is political, then

the political is not simply pointing out the lies of politicians, but understanding the complex relationships between those lies and other elements in the world.

Many of the poems in *State of the Union* have speakers who seem unable or unwilling to claim a position of political wisdom but are instead caught up in the political darkness, telling the story of their diminished agency, their disorientation and disenchantment. These are persona poems, performing the role of a citizen alienated by the very social system that is supposed to make us feel connected, satirizing the missteps and absurdities of trying to be an American who is ostensibly free but actually not free in so many ways. The personas do not have answers, solutions, or even the ability to articulate some political truth. When Ginsberg howls the opening of Howl (“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked...”), he is asserting a truth-statement, he is claiming social/political authority despite his feeling of impotence against the forces that have destroyed his generation, despite the unconventional syntax and linguistic collisions in the poem. But the poems in *State of the Union* rarely claim that kind of authority; instead they tend to create the experience of the political problem on the page rather than asserting a truth about it.

Here’s another short poem from the anthology called “I was at Congress with Myself,” by Catherine Wagner:

I was at congress with myself to conclude
should I tax myself, to strengthen my
reserves and strictly exercise
myself, so I’ll haul myself back up
if I fall down
or should I ratchet down the tax, release the lever
and run outside and see what’s there to do
and give myself a job, or blow it

on one bamboozle eve extravaganza
the world at night was twitching and flapping out
from my congress, and I gathered it in and dreamt
to my outnumberment

This speaker is clearly not a source of political intelligence. She's not offering us a new vision for living in society, nor is she even explaining what's wrong with the current vision. Rather, she's performing the role of someone stuck in the middle of contradictions, confused about what to do, powerless to access some stable understanding of how to act. The play on "congress" as both a political body and a sexual encounter, along with the suggestion of masturbation ("with myself"), makes the first line dizzyingly complex and resonant, and the entire poem feeds off this autoerotic-as-autopolitic dynamic. Lines 2-9 lay out two kinds of tax policy that are commonly associated with the American political left and right respectively: higher taxes for a stronger social safety net and lower taxes to give individuals more freedom from big government. The poem doesn't advocate one policy or the other but momentarily takes on the persona of each one as the speaker shops around for a political stance to take. By the end of the poem it becomes apparent that the speaker's internal deliberations are having little effect: she becomes distracted from the tax policy and looks out at the chaotic "world at night," and then appears to curl up and fall into a dream state. The tone at the end is precisely ambiguous, both comforting and menacing in equal parts: when the speaker says "dreamt/to my outnumberment," it sounds like she imagines being at once assaulted by countless terrorists and seduced by countless heroic lovers, and that ambiguity is magnified by the neologistic strangeness of the word "outnumberment."

A further complexity about that final word: the speaker is both a single body/person and an entire population. Or to put it another way, the speaker is like a member of Congress—both an individual and a representative of the collected citizenry, both the government and the one who is

governed. For both points of view, the speaker cultivates an obsession with herself: the poem is flush with first person pronouns in the subjective (“I”), the possessive (“my”), and the reflexive (“myself”). Rather than an indication of self-knowledge, this pattern suggests an acute uncertainty about how the speaker sees herself, and an anxiety about how much control she really has over the conditions of her individual or collective life. Despite the references to government processes and policy, the poem has an embodied physicality, as if its politics manifests on the terrain of the speaker’s single or multiple bodies.

These tensions in “I Was at Congress with Myself” intersect in illuminating ways with Foucault’s notion of “biopower,” a concept first articulated in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, and elaborated more fully by a number of theorists, including Marxists like Giorgio Agamben and Antonio Negri. Foucault argues that in ancient or classical times, sovereign power derived mainly from the right to kill, to take the life of anyone who threatened that power; in the modern era, power is oriented more toward life than death, claiming the right to determine and produce life rather than only negating it. This modern “power over life,” says Foucault, emerges in the seventeenth century and comes in two forms: disciplinary and regulatory. The former is “centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls.” This disciplinary form he calls “the anatomo-politics of the human body.” The other form of power over life is “focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity.” This system of “regulatory controls” Foucault calls “a biopolitics of the population” (History 139).

The speaker in Wagner’s poem can be seen as both a disciplined body and a regulated population, both a specific anatomy and a general society. This doubleness in the speaker’s point of view produces much of the tension in the poem, but there’s another tension as well between the

speaker as the one being controlled and the speaker as the one who controls. What Wagner's poem suggests is that the American citizen-subject is constantly liberating herself and governing herself at the same time, stuck in a tape loop of contradictory desires. An implication of Foucault's concept of biopower is that power no longer appears to control from outside; instead, power totally subsumes life, power is integrated fully into the minds and bodies of the population, and the population therefore appears to be free and democratic. The maddening quality of phrases like "should I tax myself" or "should I ratchet down the tax" is that they sound at first like the ultimate acts of democracy, and yet the poem reveals that the choice between one act and the other is no real choice at all. Caught in this contradiction, the speaker is left to define her freedom only in terms of an imagined threat from an imagined outside, to live a nightmarish fear of being outnumbered by the other. Instead of being free, we spend enormous resources locating threats to "freedom" and then waging wars against those threats. Biopower can certainly kill with greater force and efficiency than ever before in history (e.g. The Iraq War), but it does so now not in the name of the sovereign but in the name of life, in the name of protecting a population, a race, a religion, a socio-economic system, a way of life.

Because freedom and democracy have such high value in our era of biopower, linguistic innovation and creative literacy have become valuable socioeconomic tools. This means that poetry can no longer safely claim its Romantic, outsider status, and the political poem can no longer simply cry out against oppression by making traditional truth-statements. The rise of biopower means that the political poem needs to rely more on performance and persona, indirection and digression, satire and absurdity. At the same time, the political poem needs to avoid indulging in fragmentation and play for their own sake. The new political poem enacts a biopoetics, which means it keeps recalibrating the tension between stability and instability, between sincerity and irony, understanding that it cannot locate a pure space outside of biopower. A poetics of impurity always implicates itself in the mess of our contemporary political situation

rather than trying to transcend it, which means that one of the primary responses a reader might have to an impure political poem is to ask, “Is this a political poem?”

Interlude 5.2

Against Violence

The idea that to get at the thing without disturbing it, the thing articulated in its natural juices, the idea that the thing waits there to be thought, the animal that plays dead or sleeps knowing that soon the idea will come, or will think it has come,

to get at the thing in its home country, where it can naturally be found, it's a citizen of the country whose time has come to be violent, the idea of violence for the good of the thing, the idea that every state in the country has another name for it, the natural state, the sunshine state, the state where they make weapons to protect the thing, that which destroys the future cause of destruction,

the idea that thinks it has a body, the job of the body to crave salt, the job of salt to dissolve in the mouth, the idea that the ice cream man, after a long day is empty, saltless, he can no longer name a patriotic frozen confection except to commit an act of violence against it, in fact he could kill a confection in front of a child, causing that child to be frozen in a state of waiting for another sweet thing to come,

tomorrow's heat, for example, which is itself an idea waiting for a frozen confection to come and destroy it, so a thing enters the hot mouth of the child, the sweet colors of the country come as a sudden violent coolness, the idea of the country coloring the child's lips,

the thing that can't be thought yet, not until the time comes to be violent, like thunder is an idea thought by lightning, or the salted ocean that comes to take the ice cream man away, because the day has been long, many more people will be killed before tomorrow, the idea has already come, it has been paid for, and if you are a citizen of the country, it is time to sleep.

Movement 5.2

A Spectral Poetics

How We Learned to Sell Out and Rebel

Foucault's sketch of a shift from classical sovereign power to modern biopower has profound implications about how we define freedom. Pierre Bourdieu conceives a similar shift when examining the economy of the arts & literature. In his essay called "The Market of Symbolic Goods," he outlines a brief genealogy of cultural capital's field of struggle, showing how increased autonomy or democratization in the arts actually shaped the ongoing competition for authority. Beginning very broadly, Bourdieu notes that during the middle ages and the Renaissance,

intellectual and artistic life has progressively freed itself from aristocratic and ecclesiastical tutelage as well as from its aesthetic and ethical demands. This process is correlated with the constant growth of a public of potential consumers, of increasing social diversity, which guarantee the producers of symbolic goods minimal conditions of economic independence and, also, a competing principle of legitimacy. (112)

This process of becoming autonomous continues and even accelerates during the Enlightenment struggle between Industrialism and Romanticism, says Bourdieu, making room and incentive for

increasing numbers of both producers and consumers of symbolic goods, along with "agencies of consecration" that shape or determine legitimacy. As art can increasingly be treated as a commodity, it can also be treated as a pure object untouched by commercial interests: "the appearance of a distinct category of producers of symbolic goods specifically destined for the market, to some extent prepared the ground for a pure theory of art, that is, of art as art. It did so by dissociating art as commodity from art-as-pure-signification."

The increase in freedom that allows art to be defined as either commercial or non-commercial obfuscates the real "submission to the laws of the market of symbolic goods," which demand competition and actually produce all those Romantic notions of escape from vulgar commodification, including the notion of the creative genius who has privileged access to that pure spontaneous inspiration. What Bourdieu reminds us is that being a market-oriented writer can still mean producing updated versions of the Romantic project in opposition to the bourgeois project (114). Those who supposedly "sell out" as artists and those who supposedly "rebel" against commodified art are both competing in a field of cultural capital.

The Spectacle and the New Value of Creativity

If the field of cultural capital could reproduce itself on a larger scale throughout society, that society would arguably be what Guy Debord outlines so compellingly in *The Society of the Spectacle*, his prescient 1967 script for today's global market economy that saturates all of social relations with image and illusion.

In the spectacle, says Debord, "all that once was directly lived has become mere representation," and yet the spectacle is not simply "a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (12). Although often associated with the communications technology, media, advertising, and entertainment industries that pervade

society, the spectacle is not limited to these arenas. It's not merely "something *added* to the real world—not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality." It's an entire "world view transformed into an objective force" (13). The spectacle actually produces all of life, including what we call reality, and in this sense the spectacle is a unified force, fabricating everything. This unity, however, produces a perceived separation of reality and image, and this separation produces an alienation within individuals. When I purchase my can of "homestyle" processed soup, I'm simultaneously purchasing a false representation and the loss of some "real" sense of home that the spectacle also creates.

So the spectacle operates through a pervasive network of contradictory appearances, but it's not a façade behind which hides an authentic, pure reality. It's all appearance, and it presents itself "as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: 'Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear'" (15). In contrast to an earlier historical era when social relations were defined by "having," the spectacle privileges "appearing" as the primary tool for acquiring "social power" (16). The positivity of appearance, Debord argues, is actually a negation of life, an alienation that takes on a visible, legible form.

The spectacle's negation resembles the religious illusion of a transcendent paradise waiting to reward us for suffering its loss on earth, except that the spectacle promises that transcendence here and now. "The absolute denial of life, in the shape of a fallacious paradise" says Debord, "is no longer projected onto the heavens, but finds its place instead within material life itself. The spectacle is hence a technological version of the exiling of the human powers in a 'world beyond'—and the perfection of a separation *within* human beings" (18). The lost utopia is not hovering in the sky or in the afterlife; it's inside everyone, inside every can of soup. The spectator doesn't so much feel alienated from God as from himself and everything around him:

the more he contemplates [his object of desire], the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant

system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The spectacle's externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual's own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere. (23)

This pervasive and present dispossession, the spectacle's primary product, nullifies activity, community, communication, critical thought, and the spectator is saturated with passivity and acceptance.

Spectacular estrangement, Debord suggests, is the full realization of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism—that is, the abstract, mysterious, metaphysical, transcendent, aspects of the commodity, beyond its use value. As Marx says in *Capital*, fetishism is the appearance of a social dimension in the commodity that functions as a stand-in for direct social relations between individuals. So commodification "converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language" (322). Here Marx comes very close to pointing out a poetic aspect to fetishism; that is, the commodity's exchange value is much like language that takes on a socially symbolic resonance, like poetic language. In the spectacle then, those who can augment the fetishism of commodities, including those who have facility with poetic language, are increasingly in demand.

As Debord suggests, expanding fetishism means that the requirements for survival appear to increase ceaselessly, always generating "surplus survival" (27); complete satisfaction is never achieved, despite the promise of it everywhere. Fetishism is the dream of satisfaction always deferred, always expanding its appetite, so that "commodities are now *all* that there is to see" (29). Not only are workers alienated in their production, then, but also in their consumption, and to become consumerized is "the inescapable duty of the masses" (29). This alienating

consumption ironically appears as a humanizing force, a compensation for the dehumanization of the job. Thus, workers "find that every day, once work is over, they are treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role as consumers" (30). This spectacular humanization is a growth industry that will never stop growing because it produces more and more need for humanization. Even though increasing automation makes certain kinds of labor redundant, "new forms of employment have to be created" to supply "the army responsible for distributing and hyping the commodities of the moment" (31).

I would argue that today this spectacle army enlists many people who have received training in the Creative Writing field, who have developed the creative skills that are particularly effective at feeding commodity fetishism, at infusing spectacular consumption with humanizing, liberating, soulful qualities. "Chicken Soup for the Soul" is a massively popular series of self-help books; Debord might say that the entire spectacle economy presents itself as chicken soup for the soul. No longer just a good or a service, a commodity is always medicine for healing the atrophied soul of the contemporary consumer subject, and when that medicine takes on the authentic flavor of mother love or a folk remedy, it can be all the more effective.

The sense of humanity shown to the consumer is, Debord suggests, an illusion that proliferates and encourages "a general acceptance of illusion in the consumption of modern commodities. The real consumer thus becomes a consumer of illusion" (32). If we can say that literary works produce illusion (giving linguistic form to fiction, fantasy, absurdity, etc), then Creative Writing is a primary site of illusion production. Literary illusion, however, tends to call attention to itself *as* illusion, admitting its own artifice, whereas commodified illusion, I might argue, tends to present itself as truth or reality. A poem or story often employs strategies (unexpected imagery, wordplay, point-of-view shifts, plot disruptions, etc) that self-consciously announce that they're fabricated by the creative writer's imagination, and such strategies can take

on a social or political dimension as critiques of the commodified illusion's contradictory claims to truth. So literature, and the arts in general, are often set in opposition to dominant power.

What happens, however, when the commodity form becomes increasingly creative, literary, poetic—announcing its own falseness, even seeming to critique itself? What happens when TV commercials so skillfully employ poetic strategies to present retail shopping, paradoxically, as a liberation from commodity culture? What happens to poetry when the spectacle can be so poetic? Debord's theory (via Marx) is crucial for all literary practice precisely because literary practice can be a crucial means of production in the spectacle. Even if poems and stories themselves don't have much value in the marketplace, those who can transform the imaginary into a commodity have marketable skills. And yet, even if we're all potentially spectacle workers, this doesn't mean that we can do nothing but produce spectacle. Although no site of literary production can pretend to transcend commodity culture entirely, at the same time, any site can develop critical understanding of that impossibility of transcendence, which means that it can develop the possibility of individual and communal agency within that culture. In other words, no poem and no Creative Writing workshop is naturally, absolutely pure or impure; it's always possible to produce a reflexive knowledge of how creative literacy functions in the spectacle, and this reflexivity can help humans regain some control over an increasingly privatized language.

What makes the reclaiming of language for the public particularly difficult is the spectacle's ability to manufacture the appearance of division within its overall wholeness. Opposing forces within society engage in "sham battles between competing versions of alienated power" (36), producing the illusion of liberating choices between Coke and Pepsi, classic rock and alternative rock, conservative and progressive politics. The spectacle presents such differences "as markers of radically distinct social systems. But from the standpoint of their actual reality as mere *sectors*, it is clear that the specificity of each is subsumed under a universal system

as functions of a single tendency that has taken the planet for its field of operations. That tendency is capitalism" (37). For the last four decades in America, we're told, a great counterculture has arisen to combat the stagnant oppressive institutional corporate power that came to its apex in the 1950s. It becomes increasingly clear, however, that counterculture can have a complex and mutually reinforcing relationship with the dominant culture it appears to antagonize. As Debord puts it, "a smug acceptance of what exists is likewise quite compatible with a purely spectacular rebelliousness, for the simple reason that dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economics of affluence finds a way of applying its production methods to this particular raw material" (38). So counterculture is no less spectacular than the so-called mainstream, and the image of liberation is now available for purchase everywhere.

Literature, of course, had strong ties to the American countercultural movements of the mid-to-late twentieth century, but new poetry can't achieve political efficacy the same way, I suggest, because a new political efficacy must understand the increasingly blurred relationship between poetry and capitalism as it manifests in "spectacular rebelliousness" or the commodification of "dissatisfaction." What Debord explains so convincingly is that cultural conflicts can be produced by and subsumed by the entire spectacle system even though these conflicts promise an alternative system (just as the promise of transcendence and free choice fuels the illusory clashes between products for sale). Not only can literature participate in these battles, it can enact such battles as a performance, a point that Debord makes by reaching back through western literary tradition to frame the poetics of our current commodity culture: "The spectacle is the epic poem of this strife—a strife that no fall of Ilium can bring to an end" (43). Capital may be a more persistent epic poet than Homer, and no doubt the poetics of the last century is largely framed by the strife between commodities, but poetry itself can and does critique the strife while remaining immanent to it, recognizing that such a critique can itself become a commodity.

Spectacular Language: Disaster & Opportunity

A number of contemporary Italian intellectuals with Marxist leanings have picked up Debord's concept of the spectacle to help explain the transformation of all language and communication into market value. I'd like to examine a few of these appropriations, especially in the writings of Giorgio Agamben, Paolo Virno, and the collaborative efforts between Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri. Despite important differences between these theorists, they all ask the question: if life has been totally subsumed by capital, if everything has become commodifiable, if language has become a dominant product and force of production, how do we create new kinds of freedom and community? To this question I add the following: how do we reconceive the Creative Writing workshop, and how do we write creatively in this historical moment, in order to create those new kinds of freedom and community?

In an essay called "Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on The Society of the Spectacle*," Agamben points out that the spectacle is the full realization of Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, and this "disclosure of the commodity's 'secret' was the key that revealed capital's enchanted realm to our thought—a secret that capital always tried to hide by exposing it in full view" (74). The spectacle arrives when this mysterious, immaterial secret totally subsumes society, when "exchange value has completely eclipsed use value and can now achieve the status of absolute and irresponsible sovereignty over life in its entirety, after having falsified the entire social production" (75). Agamben takes up this thread again in *The Coming Community*, focusing especially on the spectacularization of communication: "the spectacle is language, the very communicativity or linguistic being of humans," which means that capitalism should be analyzed not only for its "expropriation of productive activity, but also and principally toward the alienation of language itself," which means that "what is being expropriated is the very possibility of a common good" (79). Agamben then makes a paradoxical move, arguing that because the

spectacle now so thoroughly controls the linguistic power of people around the planet, this alienation is itself what we can have in common: "for the first time it is possible for humans to experience their own linguistic being—not this or that content of language, but language *itself*, not this or that true proposition, but the very fact that one speaks." And as fully realized linguistic beings, we can form "a community with neither presuppositions nor a State" (82).

This is the same kind of move Bill Readings makes in *The University in Ruins*, proposing that the contentless "University of Excellence" can be transformed into an opportunity for real freedom and community. Readings cites Agamben, in fact, noting that *The Coming Community* is not nostalgic for cultural meaning but rather "attempts to transvalue...the process through which culture loses any specific referent" (50), which means that "we can no longer oppose an authentic, an ideal, or a national 'culture' to capitalism" (51). Later Readings builds on this transvaluation to imagine the University as a "community of dissensus," in which "communication is not transparent...and the possibility of communication is not grounded upon and reinforced by a common cultural identity" (185). This new University is not made up of ideal subjects of culture but of "singularities" who really speak and listen, who accept ongoing obligations to the community and (referring to Agamben again) a sense of "transience, the solidarity of those who have nothing in common but who are aggregated together by the state of things" (187). Borrowing from the theoretical frameworks of Agamben and Readings, I suggest that the Creative Writing workshop, as an increasingly important site for the practice of language skills in the university, needs to imagine new strategies and structures of communication. Rather than acting as a field of cultural competition that pretends to be transparent and democratic, the workshop can operate as a community of dissensus that accepts its obligation to question and understand its language and the conditions that produce that language.

Paolo Virno in *The Grammar of the Multitude* likewise uses Debord's theory of the spectacle to articulate the total commodification of human communication, but Virno is

especially wary of reducing the spectacle to mere consumerism. "In the spectacle we find exhibited..." he says, "the most relevant productive forces of society, those productive forces on which every contemporary work process must draw: linguistic competence, knowledge, imagination, etc" (60). This means that the spectacle manifests not only in the image-driven culture industry, but more importantly, it produces the means of production throughout the post-industrial economy, providing all sectors with spectacle machines (61). Virno calls the language worker of this late stage of capital, the "virtuoso," a kind of performing artist whose activities require an audience but don't generate a tangible product. Virtuosos make up a new creative labor force that provides linguistic services rather than material goods, which are increasingly produced by fully automated machines or by exploited workers in the non-Western world (59). Not disciplined by the rational and rigid system of assembly-line industrialism, the virtuoso is imaginative and inventive, flexible and informal, able to improvise and adjust to an accelerating barrage of shocks and changes, able to think in non-linear, non-hierarchical ways, to "think outside the box" (as we are urged to do everywhere these days). Considering such qualities, it's clear that the Creative Writing workshop provides basic and valuable training for the post-industrial worker. What are the implications of this function?

For Virno, the "virtuoso" is an ambivalent figure, not necessarily a positive or negative category. When subsumed by capital, however, the virtuoso (or "the multitude," society as a whole) does become oppressed, and real community becomes impossible. And Virno admits that this description fits our present situation, but like Agamben, he finds potential for liberation in these very conditions: "The salient traits of post-Fordist experience (servile virtuosity, exploitation of the very faculty of language, unending relation to the 'presence of others,' etc.) postulate, as a form of conflictual retaliation, nothing less than a radically new form of democracy" (68). This new society, allowing for a liberated virtuosity and a reclaiming of the publicness of the public sphere, would come about through more indirect but politically effective

means, namely a context-modifying defection or exit, an "unrestrained invention which alters the rules of the game and throws the adversary completely off balance" (70). If the Creative Writing workshop is a space for the development of virtuosic skills, then those skills can be used for liberatory action and creating community, just as they can be absorbed by the marketplace. This means, however, that we can't fall back on reproducing the canon-making oppositions between commercial and non-commercial aesthetics, between the establishment and the avant-garde; instead, the workshop must defect from that field of competition altogether and create new structures for communication and virtuosity.

Debord has also influenced Hardt & Negri's collaborative work, which uses the spectacle to help conceptualize "Empire." As the full realization of colonial imperialism—not just its continuation—Empire is a global system no longer defined primarily by national boundaries and centralized power. Rather, it's "a *decentered* and *detrterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command" (xii). In other words, many of the modes conceptualized by postmodern theory as tools for resisting modern sovereignty are the same modes Empire uses to promote its own power. What seem the means of liberation become the means of domination, and I would add, this confusion plays out in the field of literary production, including those struggles for legitimacy within the Creative Writing industry.

In contrast to Foucault's notion of a modern "disciplinary society," which operates within defined boundaries and institutions, Empire operates as a "society of control...in which mechanisms of command become ever more 'democratic,' ever more immanent to the social field, distributed throughout the brains and bodies of the citizens" (23). Forces often perceived as oppositions to oppression—democracy, individuality, creativity—increasingly become mechanisms for the society of control. Power is no longer imposed upon people from the outside;

people themselves produce the power that controls them, through new modes of thinking, feeling, and behaving. In his late work, Foucault gave this production of social life within individuals the name "biopolitics"; and on a global scale, Hardt & Negri argue, biopolitical power points to a fundamental shift in how capitalism organizes itself. As national boundaries diminish in significance, "huge transnational corporations construct the fundamental connective fabric of the biopolitical world" (31), and these powers "produce not only commodities but also subjectivities...needs, social relations, bodies, and minds" (33).

The primary producers of biopolitical power, according to Hardt & Negri, are the communications industries. The language of word and image functions as the crucial tool of Empire because the "communications industries...not only organize production on a new scale and impose a new structure adequate to global space, but also make its justification immanent." In other words, language controls individuals not by making them feel oppressed or manipulated, but through their bodies and minds, making them feel free and self-determined. Most advertisements, for example, no longer appear to enslave us in consumerism, nor do they even seem to sell us liberating products. In fact, they don't seem to sell anything at all. Rather, they celebrate our continuous liberation (which we've both achieved and are always achieving again), and offer us a forum in which to perform that liberation. Thus, the individual subject "produces its own image of authority. This is a form of legitimization that rests on nothing outside itself" (33).

As Virno stresses, the rise of language as a productive force is not isolated to one sector of the economy; likewise, Hardt & Negri see the emergence of biopower more generally as a shift from modern industrialization to postmodern "informatization" (280). Since the early 1970s, especially in America, labor has increasingly migrated from "industry to service jobs" that are "highly mobile and involve flexible skills," and that produce "knowledge, information, affect, and communication" (285). Hardt & Negri call this proliferating class of workers "immaterial labor"

(290) because they produce an abstract or virtual product. The organizational model for immaterial labor is no longer the "assembly line" but the "network," a decentered web of non-places making "distances less relevant" (295), yet also allowing a new kind of centralization of corporate command, because "control of laboring activity can potentially be individualized and continuous in the virtual panopticon of network production" (297). The new immaterial worker and workspace have been liberated from the disciplined confines of the factory, but corporate culture keeps developing new strategies for increasing employee productivity. And what's being produced? No longer cars or shoes or material goods in general; rather, this distinctly Western or American labor force is almost entirely devoted to manufacturing that mysterious immaterial secret of the commodity that Marx described a century and a half ago. Or more accurately, the immaterial has become the commodity itself.

The figure of the immaterial laborer recalls Virno's figure of the virtuoso, the creative knowledge worker whose labor is increasingly devoted to privatizing public life through linguistic performance. Among the most disturbing effects of this new regime of production is the loss of real dissent or debate, despite the appearance of it everywhere. Studying this effect, Hardt & Negri refer us again to the spectacle, which they describe as "an integrated and diffuse apparatus of images and ideas that produces and regulates public discourse and opinion," (321). In a society dominated by the spectacle,

what was once imagined as the public sphere, the open terrain of political exchange and participation, completely evaporates. The spectacle destroys any collective form of sociality—individualizing social actors in their separate automobiles and in front of separate video screens—and at the same time imposes a new mass sociality, a new uniformity of action and thought. On this spectacular terrain, traditional forms of struggle over the constitution become inconceivable. (322)

The spectacle—another way of conceptualizing biopolitical power or Empire—creates an immanent field in which control and conformity is organized as openness and individuality. The implications of this new organization are enormous, especially when considering how to respond to it. Fighting against it using "traditional forms of struggle" is no longer an option because those forms have largely been appropriated and commodified by the spectacular Empire itself. Totally pervasive, it "constructs social fabrics that evacuate or render ineffective any contradiction" (34), meaning that opposition cannot exist outside of it. There is no transcendent space where we can purify language or ourselves, either through coherence or dissonance, unity or fragmentation.

Nonetheless, these oppositions proliferate, struggles unfold on every channel of the media-scape, but these are "sham battles" that obscure the overall unity of the spectacle that generates them. Hardt & Negri critique this industry of the "false dichotomy," calling attention in particular to the opposition between the global and the local, between homogenous identity and heterogeneous difference (44). To hail localization and difference as authentic alternatives to globalization and identity, they argue, is to affirm this dichotomy and ignore that both choices are produced, and sold as commodities, by Empire (45). This doesn't mean that no "real alternatives" or "potentials for liberation" exist, but that they must "exist *within* Empire. We should be done once and for all with the search for an outside, a standpoint that imagines a purity for our politics" (46).

Hardt & Negri avoid the "either/or" choice between these two commodified poles, which allows them to begin articulating a more effective response to Empire.

Difference, hybridity, and mobility are not liberatory in themselves, but neither are truth, purity, and stasis. The real revolutionary practice refers to the level of *production*. Truth will not make us free, but taking control of the production of truth will. Mobility and hybridity are not liberatory, but taking control of the production of mobility and stasis, purities and mixtures is. (156)

In other words, rather than transcending Empire, we can reappropriate its modes of production. Because language is the primary mode that Empire uses to consolidate its power, language can be the primary site of reappropriation. This is why the Creative Writing workshop is such a crucial space in the negotiation of power: because the language skills developed in this space have become so powerful in the age of Empire, and because it can become a space for reappropriation. Like Virno, Hardt & Negri conceive a political strategy of indirect and elusive means, using the very tools of spectacular capital against it, deploying the immateriality and flexibility of Empire to construct a counter-Empire: "Whereas being-against in modernity often meant a direct and/or dialectical opposition of forces, in postmodernity being against might well be most effective in an oblique or diagonal stance" (212).

This kind of obliqueness, I suggest, might well benefit from writers of poetry and fiction, including those involved in Creative Writing, but these writers and this academic field must first develop critical awareness of the very social and historical conditions that have made them so important. As Hardt & Negri describe the present situation,

if communication has increasingly become the fabric of production..., then control over linguistic sense and meaning and the networks of communication becomes an ever more central issue for political struggle.... All the elements of corruption and exploitation are imposed on us by the linguistic and communicative regimes of production: destroying them in words is as urgent as doing so in deeds. (404)

If Empire operates first of all through words, by alienating individuals from the words they use, by using those spectacularized words to thoroughly endanger any real sense of community, then words themselves must be reappropriated, words themselves are the means of production that must be seized. For the Creative Writing workshop to enact this kind of reappropriation, it must begin to examine itself as a productive space, and its pedagogy must keep generating

opportunities to question how and why words are used as they are used. Regaining control of language must involve challenging the workshop and the students, not in terms of aesthetic evaluation, but in terms of production.

The Search for a Spectral Poetics

Particularly in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord appears decidedly pessimistic about the potential for poetry and the arts to do anything but be spectacular and produce more spectacle. But the earlier writings and activities of the Situationist International (SI), of which Debord was a central figure, devote much more attention to artistic strategies within the marketplace of appearances. Because the writings of Debord and the SI unleash so many vicious salvos against various art movements, particularly those associated with the avant-garde, their claims for any artistic agency can seem contradictory or even non-existent. In his essay, "The Long Walk of the Situationist International," Greil Marcus notes how the SI first seized his attention by cutting "through the suburban cul-de-sac that passed for cultural rebellion in the 1950s" (2), particularly in the following passage he quotes from the SI's journal: "The rotten egg smell exuded by the idea of God envelops the mystical cretins of the American 'Beat Generation'" (2). Marcus emphasizes that this critique was published not with the easy benefit of hindsight, but in 1958; so Debord and his SI cronies were already questioning the transcendent aspirations of the art/social formation whose signature epic/manifesto had become Ginsberg's "Howl" only a few years earlier. What Marcus finds most compelling about the SI project, however, is not its dramatic dismissals but its theory of art—an art that's attuned to the specific challenges of contesting the spectacle. Summing up the SI's artistic strategy, Marcus says, "Society was organized as appearance, and could be contested on the field of appearance; what mattered was the puncturing of appearance—speech and action against the spectacle that was, suddenly, not babble, but understood" (12).

An SI document called "All the King's Men" explores this tricky terrain of art as political action, announcing immediately that "the problem of language is at the center of every struggle for the abolition or preservation of today's alienation" (McDonough 153). Thus, language is a primary site where social power is negotiated, and language has the potential to be reclaimed for the public sphere: "Words *work* on behalf of the ruling organization of life. Yet nevertheless they have not become automatons;...through them, forces are expressed that may frustrate calculations" (McDonough 153). The rest of "All the King's Men" frames the struggle over words in more literary terms, as a struggle over the meaning and function of poetry:

Information is power's poetry...the mediated faking of what is. Conversely, poetry must be understood as immediate communication in reality and real modification of that reality. It is nothing other than liberated language, language that wins back its richness and, breaking significations, at once recovers words, music, cries, gestures, painting, mathematics, events. (McDonough 154)

So there's no doubt that Debord and the SI make positive proposals for art, but such proposals implicitly or explicitly involve a critical recognition of how art's attacks against commodity culture can themselves be commodified. This is why Marxist theory figures so prominently in Debord's art theory—because an important function of art is to understand its position in the capitalist system of production and consumption.

Toward the end of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord gives larger historical context to the situation of modern art, arguing that its emergence coincided with society's loss of community and a "truly common language" (132) associated with traditional myth and religion. Modern art, declaring itself independent, begins a prolonged attack against a common social language, and against itself. As Debord puts it, "The fact that the language of real communication has been lost is what the modern movement of art's decay, and ultimately of its formal annihilation, expresses *positively*. What it expresses *negatively* is that a new common language has yet to be found"

(133). Increasingly unable or unwilling to communicate, art proudly waved the banner of individualism, and "from romanticism to cubism," it enacted "the fragmentation and destruction of the artistic sphere" (134). Not a revolutionary act, says Debord, this artful annihilation participates in the spectacle's false division between tradition and innovation. While museum culture defends art's tradition in dead forms, new art proclaims itself the enemy of tradition with manifestos promising escape to aesthetic purity.

So Debord expresses special disdain for self-consciously avant-garde movements and how their attacks against tradition celebrate change while negating the possibility of change. Ironically, then, art's "vanguard is its own disappearance" (135), because its newness is not critically reflexive of its own participation in a larger system that undermines communication and community. In one of his most illuminating passages, Debord places this argument on the plane of the literary:

Thoroughgoing attacks on language are liable to emerge in this context coolly invested with positive value by the official world, for the aim is to promote reconciliation with a dominant state of things from which all communication has been triumphantly declared absent. Naturally, the critical truth of such attacks, as utterances of the real life of modern poetry and art, is concealed. The spectacle, whose function is *to bury history in culture*, presses the pseudo-novelty of its modernist means into the service of a strategy that defines it in the profoundest sense. Thus a school of neo-literature baldly admitting that it merely contemplates the written word for its own sake can pass itself off as something truly new. (137)

What Debord reminds us here is that poetic newness is not a self-evident and natural category, and that the spectacle has a fetish for progress. Consider all the terms we use to describe our favorite poems and stories that also refer to positive value in the marketplace: innovative, ground-

breaking, cutting-edge, revolutionary, etc. So the avant-garde is produced by the same commodity culture it aims to destroy or escape. Like capital, it requires constant change that is actually no change, a highly-determined and self-conscious bid for a paradise of innovation that never really creates an alternative. The canon debates about insiders and outsiders, included and excluded, are likewise constructed by the spectacle's image industry. Nonetheless, these debates present themselves as natural and inevitable, and certainly plenty of art and poetry is shaped by these spectacular antagonisms.

Central to Debord's strategy for a creative practice that challenges the spectacle without transcending it is the concept of *detournement*, which he defines as a diversion or distancing from "whatever has been turned into an official verity" (145). Tom McDonough explains *detournement* as the activity "of diverting elements of affirmative bourgeois culture to revolutionary ends, of distorting received meanings" (xiv), then smartly challenges Debord at his own game. Noting that "the concept of 'recuperation,' the idea that avant-garde innovations might be recovered for use by the reigning social order" (xiii), is the "exact corollary" of *detournement*; "in fact, recuperation and *detournement* [are] one and the same, a shared cultural strategy" (xiv). McDonough's skepticism of "the SI's claims to a position of absolute contestation" is convincing because it illuminates how any critique of the spectacle is in danger of hypocrisy.

I suggest, however, that the strategy of *detournement* is flexible and capacious enough to avoid being paralyzed by a rigidly oppositional stance, particularly when Debord frames the strategy as a continuous and reflexive process that doesn't aspire to achieve a pure uncommodified space. Giving nuance to his initial formulation of the concept, Debord says:

Detournement...is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It occurs within a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty. This language is inaccessible in the highest degree to confirmation by any earlier or supra-critical reference point. On the contrary, its internal

coherence and its adequacy in respect of the practically possible are what validate the ancient kernel of truth that it restores. *Detournement* finds its cause on nothing but its own truth as critique at work in the present. (146)

What Debord suggests here is that language can accept its uncertainty while at the same time communicating in a practical way. This means that any critique of the spectacle must be "fluid" and cannot aspire to establish truth beyond its moment. Not fixed in ideological certainty, it forges an "internal coherence" by opening up to semantic possibility, "the practically possible," a multitude of meanings that affirm rather than negate a common language, that "ancient kernel."

A poetics of detournement points to a new kind of relationship with an audience, a new kind of engagement that allows an audience to participate in a conversation. By continually diverting the language of spectacle without claiming an external position of authority, the poetics of detournement avoids the danger of "speaking *to others*...without any real dialogue" (133). Further articulating the implications of this new audience relationship suggested by Debord, Vincent Kauffman says, "art must...transform itself into a 'speaking with' that...is no longer identified exclusively with either the author or the reader-spectator but becomes the work of everyone" (McDonough 286).

As a complement to Debord's concept of detournement, I propose a *spectral* poetics: a mode of writing and reading that responds to the spectacle's production of appearances and illusion without attempting to transcend it, ghosting the false oppositions rather than attaching to them. Because the spectacle's basic strategies have grown so pervasive and powerful in recent decades, because they have manifested even more monstrously into what Debord called in 1988 "the integrated spectacle" (*Comments*, 8), a spectral poetics has become even more relevant.

Self-consciously avant-garde movements or schools have not fared well in the American poetry scene for the several decades that coincide with the full flowering of the spectacle society. The one notable exception, Language Poetry, whose landmark anthology came out in 1987, is

notable mostly because its avant-garde-ness has been worried, hated, ridiculed, and dismissed, not the least by those said to be its practitioners. This avant-garde anxiety, I suggest, is produced largely by the widespread commodification of the avant-garde and hipness in general. It's difficult to turn on the TV now without witnessing a commercial that sells tools for launching your own personal revolution, from SUVs to cell phone plans to credit cards. So poetry's vanguard (and transcendent) pretensions have been increasingly muted. This doesn't mean, however, that poetry in general has retreated to some traditional terrain, for tradition itself is increasingly commodified, often in the package of nostalgia, family values, or safety. Although a spectral poetry is not bound to a single historical period, I'd argue that it has emerged more emphatically during recent decades in which the spectacle has so thoroughly subsumed poetic impulses.

The Emporium of Aesthetic Battles

But wait, maybe tradition *is* making a comeback. Lately I've been hearing a buzz of criticism accusing new emerging poets of being too experimental, avant-garde, transgressive, too associative and playful, too oblique and opaque, too confectionary and stylized, too difficult, illogical, elusive. Excess is everywhere, but not enough sincerity, real emotion, humanity, not enough narrative, rationality, and coherence. This new poetry, the critics are saying, tries so hard to be innovative that it ends up sounding self-consciously contrived, overwrought, burdened by irony and gimmicks, lacking authenticity.

What's the source of this problem? These essays point to a variety causes, but particularly interesting to me is that all three directly implicate the academic Creative Writing industry. The most scathing critique comes from David Yezzi in an essay called "The Unrealists' Return," published in *The New Criterion*. Yezzi scoffs at the false pluralism of the new unrealism as an exclusion of "the general reader" disguised as an inclusiveness; this new poetry has made transgressing boundaries so programmatic that "the gateway through to the secret garden of so-

called cutting-edge art is now a superhighway that anyone with a graduate degree in poetry can navigate at high speed" (4). The gateway may have transformed into a much more inclusive superhighway, but it's clogged with those awful MFAs in Creative Writing, who cultivate an elitism that abandons the general reader at the nearest rest stop.

A less antagonistic judgment is handed down by Dana Levin in *American Poetry Review*. Framing the current obsession with experimentation itself as a backlash against the post-Confessional mode that dominated the late twentieth century, she blames a couple of underlying anxieties, the first of which is a response to Creative Writing competitiveness, to "being one of hundreds (maybe thousands?) of MFA graduates driving for a place, if not in the canon, then in *Fence*" (45). The academic Creative Writing industry, Levin suggests, actually encourages an anxious experimental excess as a way to achieve distinction in an overcrowded field of poets seeking official legitimation or at least the street-cred of being published in a hip magazine.

Tony Hoagland offers a slightly more equivocal criticism in his essay called "Fear of the Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment," published in *Poetry*. Searching for the sources of this skitteriness, Hoagland says, "The energetic cadres of MFA grads have certainly contributed to this milieu, founding magazines, presses, and aesthetic clusters which encourage and influence each other's experiments." Here Creative Writing is presented as a community-forging force, building a supportive environment for MFAs and their organizations of poetry production, but there's also the implication throughout this essay that these "clusters" breed an insular cliquishness that's forgotten how to feel strong feeling and tell good stories that communicate to broader audiences.

Creative Writing has been a target for scorn since its beginnings, of course, but the typical critique has accused it of cultivating a bland, conservative aesthetic, most notably the quiet, sincere post-Confessional poem that privileges plain language and autobiographical first-person narrative, and that culminates in an understated epiphany with a tidy sense of closure.

Among the more prominent of these critiques is Christopher Beach's rigorously researched book, *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry between Community and Institution*, which lambastes "the overly conventional mindset and conservative institutional orientation governing much of the production, dissemination, and discussion of poetry in this country. This orientation, I will argue, has been in large part created and perpetuated by the growing creative-writing industry and its satellite structures (journals, presses, reading series, prizes, writers' conferences)" (18). Later Beach applies this opposition more specifically to the dominant aesthetic produced by the Creative Writing workshop, which "tends to homogenize what has traditionally constituted authorial style—substituting a notion of personal 'voice' or 'authenticity' for more inventive linguistic or stylistic manipulation" (53).

How do we explain the distance between Beach's argument, published in 1999, and the new crop of critiques, all published in 2006? Did it take only seven years for the Creative Writing industry to reverse itself, not only to make enough room for "more inventive linguistic or stylistic manipulation" but so much room as to become already excessive, requiring another critical backlash in the opposite direction? Confusion escalates when you consider the myriad of other storylines that attempt to explain the current state of poetry. Wasn't today's brand of experimentation, for example, supposed to be a warmer, more human and humorous kind than the notoriously cold, abstract Language poetry of the 80s and 90s, a movement that supposedly took experimentation to its farthest limits?

Rather than trying to resolve these aesthetic battles, I'd like to step away from them and explore how they're produced, and what purposes they serve. The academic Creative Writing industry has indeed grown at a remarkable rate in recent years, and it has certainly become the primary site for the production of published poetry in America. Given this status, Creative Writing deserves serious critical scrutiny; the problem, however, is not that Creative Writing encourages one aesthetic or another—either an overly conservative, traditional poetry or an

overly experimental, avant-garde poetry. Rather, the problem is that literary production in general is determined by a field of cultural capital in which opposing aesthetics struggle for legitimacy and power. The Creative Writing industry has become the major stage on which this battle for poetry's cultural capital is fought, but this battle informs and constructs the entire field of literary production, including the kind of criticisms waged against Creative Writing outlined above.

Cultural Capital and Its Children

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu argues that literary struggles pitting one aesthetic position against another are really competitions for legitimacy or cultural authority. These competitions are often difficult to see because they're veiled by an outward rejection of economic value, vying instead for what Bourdieu calls "symbolic capital" (75), the cultural value of rejecting commercial success in the short run, the claim of integrity associated with disavowing the marketplace, which in the long run can actually produce substantial economic success.

Forms or genres like poetry that have relatively limited opportunity for financial reward generate even more concentrated competition for symbolic capital, according to Bourdieu: "poetry, by virtue of its restricted audience (often only a few hundred readers), the low profits, which make it the disinterested activity *par excellence*, and also the prestige, linked to the historical tradition initiated by the Romantics, is destined to charismatic legitimation which is given to only a few individuals, sometimes only one per generation and, by the same token, to a succession of successful or abortive revolutions" (51). This field of competition might pit high Modernist against Beat, Beat against Confessional, Confessional against Language, Language against Neo-Formalist; the particular configuration of the conflict is less relevant than the conflict itself. Whether the aesthetic that's being defended (or used as weaponry in an attack) is seen to be conservative or progressive, inclusive or exclusive, avant-garde or establishment, is irrelevant to

the field of cultural capital, because all these positions require the struggle itself in order to exist. The positions are not inevitable or natural categories but are generated by the oppositional competition, by the process of claiming some authenticity and symbolic power against other claims.

Those who critique the Creative Writing industry by associating it with one aesthetic or another (whether like Yezzi, Levin, and Hoagland on one side, or like Beach on the other side) reinforce and perpetuate the field of cultural capital, a system that thrives on competition and reproduces the inequities of a social system thoroughly saturated by market value. Aesthetic positions rise and fall in the Creative Writing industry, but what remains are the larger conditions of production, the underlying structure of the field of cultural capital. This competition manifests at the most basic pedagogical site in the industry, the workshop, which typically encourages, even demands, that aesthetic positions be taken in a struggle for legitimacy within the workshop group. If Creative Writing can be reformed, it must be rethought and restructured beginning in the classroom, where participants typically sit around a table evaluating each other's work, engaging in countless small struggles for authority and power. Especially at the graduate (MFA and PhD) level, where the structural competitiveness is especially entrenched, Creative Writing needs to imagine workshops without position-takings, without struggles for symbolic capital, without reproducing the system of winners and losers, recognized and unrecognized, insiders and outsiders.

Twentieth Century Oppositional Poetics

The story of poetry in the twentieth century is often presented as a grand battle between tradition and the avant-garde, between this school and that school, but of course there are many poetics that cannot be easily categorized on one side of these oppositions or another. Rather than

trying to transcend power by making the choice between self-realization and self-fragmentation, between identity and difference, many poetics remains immanent to the system that produces such choices, critiquing it by magnifying and haunting it rather than by escaping it.

To begin approaching a terminology for this poetry, I'd first like to survey the generally accepted terminology used to discuss American poetry of the last half century. Among the most widely-respected reference works for literary studies, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* is certainly an exemplary source. If its digested format makes an easy target, its privileged status in the production of literary knowledge deserves extra critical scrutiny. In my edition's "American Poetry" entry, the eleven columns of densely-packed text about "The Postwar Period" are structured almost entirely around particular schools of poets, and these schools tend to fall into broader categories called traditional or innovative: "If Eliot, Auden, and Frost exerted the most pervasive influence on the dominant tradition of the 1950s, Pound and Williams began to exert a like effect on an emerging avant-garde" (Davidson 61). On the dominant side we find poets associated with New Criticism and New Formalism, and the dominant reactions against these movements, Confessional and "deep image." On the more splintered avant-garde side, we find poets associated with identity politics, like Black Poetry and Feminist Poetry, and those supposedly more aesthetically inclined, like Beat, Black Mountain, New York School, San Francisco Renaissance, and later, Language Poetry (Davidson 60-66).

The entry makes at least one brief but valiant attempt to complexify the situation: "Of course, group designations...do little to accommodate local variations and individual styles.... The anthology 'wars' of the 1960s between 'open' and 'closed,' 'raw' and 'cooked,' 'Beat' and 'square' verse served only to separate poets into warring camps and to provide confused critics with ammunition for dismissive reviews" (63). This apology, however, does little to offset the looming presence of those categories and its centerpiece, the binary opposition between conservative and avant-garde. Of course, the entry's author isn't making this terminology up

himself; these categories do exist historically, and it would've been difficult to write this entry without them. What I want to question here is not how certain poets or groups of poets are incorrectly labeled, but how the system of literary taxonomy is considered natural and inevitable, and how poetry can engage in a critique of the power that produces that system.

I could argue that, for example, Sylvia Plath and John Berryman don't deserve to be tagged as establishment Confessional poets, especially considering that their later and most influential works (*Ariel* and *The Dream Songs*) tend to reject autobiographical directness and to disrupt semantic and syntactic conventions. I could also argue that, for example, Rae Armantrout and Michael Palmer don't deserve to be tagged as avant-garde, Language poets because their work often creates a quiet, intimate voice that obsesses over precise meanings. These kinds of critical adjustments to the canon may have their uses, but consider how the poetry of these writers might call into question the entire machine of canonical oppositions, the endless tape-loop of insider/outsider status. Consider how this poetry might call attention to a commodity culture that produces these aesthetic pseudo-struggles, how this poetry recognizes that the categories of "traditional" and "innovative" are, increasingly, products for sale in the cultural marketplace.

Such considerations may have real implications for poetics. Rather than producing a discourse that perpetuates the power of aesthetic oppositions as commodities, a spectral poetics can articulate how poetry critiques that power. Rather than claiming ownership of either the modernist bid for transcendent self-realization or the postmodernist bid for transcendent self-fragmentation, poetics can examine poetry's strategies for performing and questioning how capital promises transcendence through these commodified categories. This poetics and this poetry remain immanent to power, not promising a utopian escape from it, but like a specter, haunting it with disturbing or exaggerated images of itself, ghosting the world after life has been subsumed by the commodity form.

Peter Gizzi's Spectral Poetics

My notion of a spectral poetics is a direct response to Debord's concept of "the spectacle," and (I hope) a complement to it. Etymologically akin, the words "specter" and "spectacle" share the French root "spectare," which means "to behold" or "look." Both words suggest a visual image of reality to be looked at, but whereas "spectacle" often refers to something an onlooker can passively and pleasantly consume, "specter" often refers to something that disturbs, frightens, even terrifies. So a spectral poetry can haunt the spectacle, not as a mass-produced copy of it, but as an unsettling apparition of it. I want to discuss how this haunting can happen, through a reading of a poem by Peter Gizzi that troubles a commodity-subsumed society in ghostly ways.

If the spectator is always consuming the opposing sides of a commodified battle, especially the now-traditional dream of the unified self and the now-avant-garde dream of a fragmented self, a spectral poetry might haunt this relationship, not entirely abandoning its corporeal figure or its human voice, nor becoming entirely abstracted or unrecognizable. I'd argue that this speaker as specter can be found, to greater or lesser degree, in a wide range of current poetics, including that of Peter Gizzi. His poem, "To Be Written in No Other Country," published in his third volume, *Some Values of Landscape and Weather*, shows how a contemporary poem can haunt the culture of opposition without attaching to an oppositional stance itself.

The country referred to by the title of this poem, it quickly becomes apparent, is America. This title resonates simultaneously with a certain bitterness and arrogance, evoking the sense of America's unique brand of oppression and its sense of blessed exceptionalism, giving form to that contradiction in a single voice. Another ambivalence lurks in the opening infinitive verb phrase: on one hand, "To Be Written" sounds like an urgent rallying cry for writers to challenge the

dominant power of this "country"; on the other hand, there's a tone of resignation in the possibility that what follows will be another feckless representation of a power system that so effectively renders critical language impotent.

Consider, also, how highlighting written-ness in the title brings the writer into being, into the present of the poem, and may even give him some unique authorial authority, the ability to wield imaginative or intellectual agency over language. And yet the would-be writer is indeed limited, perhaps even controlled, by social or political forces, for that "No Other Country" doesn't even allow the writing to happen beyond itself: the country may have subsumed the writing before the writing even exists. Finally, consider the strange implications of time in the title. The verb's future tense suggests that the poem has not yet been written; it's scheduled "to be written" sometime in the future. What then follows the title if not the finished writing itself? A sketch, an outline, a blueprint of what will come? Are there gaps here to be filled in later, problems to be solved, revisions to be made? And will the future writer be the same as the present writer? Perhaps we don't even know who will finally write this poem, so that sense of an embodied speaker keeps receding into the distance, endlessly deferred.

This title, then, is a network of ambiguities and possibilities. It does not refuse to be interpreted, nor does it refuse to communicate, but it does refuse to claim ownership of a definitive truth or direction. Rather than consuming language as a commodity, and rather than trying to escape language as a commodity, this title acts as a specter haunting the entire commodity system, disturbing its predictable form, never quite letting it sleep or arrive. This shadowing pattern occurs throughout the poem: always making what it represents slightly unstable by magnifying, shrinking, stretching, dividing, twisting, swallowing, and evacuating it.

Here's the body of the poem in its entirety:

Now it is time for the scratch ticket
to bruise the inner wishes of single moms,
for night to be enough for the pensioner
and his "buster" in TV light.
If we were to answer the geese overhead
would we ever find a home
lost as we are in the kiddy section of Wal-Mart?
As a youth did Grant wonder
that he would become both a drunk
and president and die like Melville, forgotten,
buried under ambition and guilt.
It is a sorry day for the pollster and body electorate
for the mildewed pages of a wound dresser.
And when and whenever past Saturdays
of adolescents in faded Kodak
enter the discourse of politicians
know you are not alone and your scrapbook
will be enough in talk of resolutions
and what you plan to do this weekend
to the garage and to the porch.

What can be said about this poem? I'll begin by discussing what this poem is not doing. It's not a narrative poem, and the speaker has neither the charming vulnerability of a first-person singular storyteller, nor the soothing disinterest of an omniscient storyteller. This poem is also not purely lyrical, either in the sense of being a personal, Romantic expression of feelings or a decadent indulgence in the playful musicality of language.

This speaker instead has, at least partly, the tone of a truth teller or rhetorician, the slight flavor of a politician, philosopher, or activist, speaking for a general public "we." The first five words of the poem, "Now it is time for...", have the rhetorical flourish of a political speech, recalling Lincoln's rallying cry for the Civil War effort: "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country." About a century later Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, which contains this variation on Lincoln's rhetorical move:

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.

King repeats the parallel structure twice more, conjuring the specter of Lincoln, but with critical and savvy difference. A passing century and the hollow hopes of abolition cast grim shadows on Lincoln's famously liberatory line, so King borrows that riveting syntax while revising its content, disturbing the congealed triteness at its core.

The speaker of "To Be Written" performs a similarly spectral move, evoking both Lincoln and King, but revising both of their prescriptive approaches, hinting that such genuine-sounding calls for action have become saturated with marketability. So the poem's calls for action take on a weird logic in which inanimate things (scratch ticket, night) are asked to perform unlikely services (to bruise, to be enough) for human figures (single moms, pensioner). The two main prepositional phrases of the sentence project images of powerless desperation within consumer culture. First, the stereotypically underprivileged "single moms" purchase hopeless rectangles of commodified hope in the form of "scratch tickets." Then we see the comfortable pensioner, perhaps an honorably discharged veteran of a foreign war, relaxing in the peaceful

glow of his commercial entertainment, perhaps with a familiar, reliable dog named "buster." Although sated and lacking the material lack that might produce "inner wishes of single moms," the pensioner appears to be equally powerless, even more passive and slowly swallowed by loneliness. Gizzi's poem, then, revises the prescriptive call for political action into a descriptive call for awareness of the subsumption of political action, and life itself, by capital. These lines don't just repeat the spectacularization of political language but infuse it with an eerie animating presence that blends slight flavors of melancholy and humor, producing a kind of cognitive resistance to the spectacle.

The poem's next sentence performs a similar operation: "If we were to answer the geese overhead/ would we ever find a home/ lost as we are in the kiddy section of Wal-Mart?" Again the speaker begins with a lofty rhetorical gesture, here in the heights of a conditional construction speculating about how geese might help us overcome our alienation. But another deflation occurs as the absurdities and logical leaps become apparent. First we have to reckon with how the speaker moves from a television-lit room with a thoroughly domesticated dog who has perhaps lost his motivation for the hunt, to a vision of geese honking as they fly home. Then, just as the potential for a homecoming sets in, we lose ourselves again in the aisles of consumption. Clearly the speaker doubts that we will "find a home," for even if we did have the desire to wake from the sensory deprivation of our human subjectivity and "answer the geese," we'd still find ourselves seduced by the ultimate category of false appearances for sale: cheap toys, almost of them representations of other spectacular representations, amassed in the pulsing heart of history's greatest retail giant. The poem offers us solace neither in the possibility of self-realization in the purity of "nature" imagery, nor in that potentially glamorous alienation. Rather, this speaker haunts the entire system, and is, like a specter, neither homeless nor at home, neither lost nor found.

In only seven lines, this poem has blown through no fewer than four locations, without any obvious logical progression. What holds it together finally is the intriguing, suggestive resonance between these apparently discreet images, and the sheer force of the speaker's voice, manifested mainly in the seductive and familiar modulations of its syntax, along with its mostly standard grammar and punctuation (except for an occasional missing comma). In other words, the voice sounds immediately convincing, even if what it says can't really be paraphrased or definitively explained. Persisting throughout the poem, this formal pattern exemplifies the spectral relationship to the spectacle: the speaker passes through language, or lets it pass through him, but doesn't attempt to transcend or solve the problem of language.

The poem's next sentence makes an even more mysterious non-sequitur, although picking up the childhood theme from the Wal-Mart scene: "As a youth did Grant wonder/ that he would become both a drunk/ and president and die like Melville, forgotten,/ buried under ambition and guilt." The sharp juxtaposition of this nineteenth century Americana and what precedes it suggests that the alienation of consumer society has a history, and that history produces both a president and a now-revered writer who both faded into obscurity and poverty as they approached death. Grant, who'd been forced to leave military service because of alcohol abuse before the Civil War, re-enters in 1861, achieves military superstardom by war's end, then the presidency. Retiring from public service, he becomes financially destitute and aimless, then settles down to write a massive memoir, although he dies before its very successful publication. Melville never achieves any stardom during his lifetime, turning to poetry and disenchantment later in life, but his revenant has come to loom enormously over the American literary canon. Both of these figures existed in a kind of proto-spectacle society in which public appearances and personas are not only helping to create success and failure, but becoming success and failure itself, along with the "ambition and guilt" that potentially colors both ends of this opposition. The reference to Grant also reminds us of the Lincolnesque rhetoric that opened the poem, Grant being the

quintessential "good man" as opportunist who came to the aid of his country, and who helped define modern (spectacular) warfare's primary tactic: merciless and unapologetic destruction in the name of noble ideals.

Continuing to worry the Civil War era, the next sentence conjures another nineteenth century literary figure, Walt Whitman: "It is a sorry day for the pollster and the body electorate/ for the mildewed pages of a wound dresser." The elderly bard, taking a pause from his tireless but only modestly successful self-promotion as a poet, famously volunteered as a nurse for wounded Civil War soldiers in Washington D.C. One of his most evocative and best-known poems from this late period is "The Wound-Dresser," which projects a Whitman-like first-person speaker who, bearing the shadows of his own mortality, ghosts through the flickering lives of almost-dead young men. This poem's focal moment resonates remarkably with a specter-like speaker reckoning with spectacle-like social conditions: "But in silence, in dreams' projections/ While the world of gain and appearance and mirth goes on,/ So soon what is over forgotten, and waves wash the imprints off the sand/ With hinged knees returning I enter the doors" (Whitman 443). The speaker here is embodied only partially, or ephemerally. This blurring figure, transitory through physical spaces and as a physical being, contrasts with the robust, fully-embodied prototype that dominates Whitman's earlier work, evoked in Gizzi's poem by the play on "body electric" performed by the phrase "body electorate."

The day is sorry as that hope for realizing the corporeal song of myself grows impossibly naïve and mildewed, yet amazingly persistent as a commodity. The day is sorry as the electorate's real political agency disappears while the appearance of agency abounds in the form of public opinion polls. The day is sorry, yes, but there's still a slightly humorous tone poking a hint of fun at that sorrow's tendency to take itself too seriously and become itself a cliché. In other words, the poem is devoted to avoiding pretensions of commodified language, both the self-satisfied

prescriptions for solving our alienated condition and the self-mocking destructions of any communication at all.

The closing sentence of "To Be Written in No Other Country," continues this tonal balancing:

And when and whenever past Saturdays
of adolescents in faded Kodak
enter the discourse of politicians
know you are not alone and your scrapbook
will be enough in talk of resolutions
and what you plan to do this weekend
to the garage and to the porch.

What makes this passage so compelling is its spectral indiscernability between sincerity and sarcasm. That almost grandiose rhetorical fluidity continues, and the ghostly return of the phrase "be enough," this time preceded by the optimistic "will," does give reassurance that this speaker really does aspire to connect these disparate pieces together. On the other hand, a cynical critique of contemporary power keeps creeping into the speaker's voice.

We've returned from the nineteenth century now to a more recent time when memory itself is represented on special paper and sold by a corporation named Kodak, when leisure time becomes widely-available, producing a weekly interval of freedom devoted to consumption. Weekends were made for the pursuit of happiness and for being a child, or nostalgically returning to childhood with adult versions of play. Kodak memories of those Saturday liberations from institutional control will suffice, and politicians can offer further representations of these representations in their discourse. Pretty soon we experience nostalgia for something we never really experienced, one of the crucial mechanisms of the spectacle. It turns out, moreover, that modern play is often a representation of work, and so too, adults in leisure time create the image

of productivity and individual agency through household projects, plans to repair or improve the garage or porch. It doesn't seem to matter that the political "talk of resolutions" is merely an appearance of communication, because we have all the nostalgia we can consume, and besides, we're "not alone" in this passive acceptance, we can actually feel a kind of virtual community with other isolated and depoliticized individuals.

Regardless of Gizzi's intentions or training in political theory, his poem calls attention to a society, life, and language that have been totally saturated by the commodity form. More importantly, he engages with that spectacle not as an uncritical spectator but as a specter, not separate from the spectacle but haunting it, disturbing it by revealing its deceptions. This speaker neither accepts nor rejects the bid for self-realization, recognizing that both options can be commodified. Rather than congealing in repetition, like a Kodak snapshot, he remains transient, he is transience itself, moving through the spectacle actively, without attaching to its purchasable oppositions.

"To Be Written In No Other Country," and any poem with spectral tendencies, is useful in that it models a critique of power that remains immanent to power. The model must keep changing, and despite poetry's static written-ness on the printed page, a spectral poetry can strive to be a process. By developing proliferating networks of associations and semantic possibilities, Gizzi's poem keeps transforming on the page with repeated readings in time. Spectral poetry is productive, and what it produces is not just a critique but also the spectral subjectivity that suggests ways of really living and communicating in a society that lives and communicates by appearance.

Obscenery, Impurity, and the Process of Depositioning

Akin to the concept of a spectral poetics is the concept of obscenery that the contemporary poet Joe Wenderoth elaborates, particularly in his essay called "Obscenery," and

more loosely in his book of essays, *The Holy Spirit of Life*. Poetic speech, Wenderoth argues, always exists in some relationship to obscenity, which is the mysterious, unstable ground that refuses to claim ownership of the dominant, stable scenes of language and life.

Wenderoth traces the etymology of the word "obscene" back to tragic drama, which conceived of "an area off-scene, which is to say, off-stage, wherein a tragedy's unshowable but altogether decisive acts were imagined to have been carried out." This unshowable unknown nonetheless colors and informs "the façade of the knowable story" without being possessed or reduced "to narrative or to idea." For Wenderoth, the function of the poetic is to help us submit to the obscene realm, to cultivate a reverence for "the wrong thing, the thing that can't be accommodated" (*Life* 30). Because this reverence is "difficult, complex, heterogeneous, and not reducible to the known," poetry that fully engages with the obscene is often ignored or dismissed as irreverent (*Life* 31).

What I find especially compelling and relevant about the poetics of obscenity is that it refuses to claim a pure, authentic, transcendent space for poetry. This refusal, for Wenderoth, manifests primarily as a constant departure from the unified, autonomous self that is celebrated by advertisements and saturates the American democratic episteme. As Wenderoth puts it, "poetic speech is...the practice of saying goodbye to one's self," and yet this departure is actually an honest engagement with what is real. The "success stories" that proliferate in our "materialist culture" tell us night after night that "our most real situation can be 'successfully' transcended," but for Wenderoth, "poetic speech can arise toward doubting such success" ("Obscenery" 31).

The Marxist flavor of this skepticism toward transcendent aspirations becomes a little more explicit in Wenderoth's insistent questioning of the concept of ownership. In opposition to poetic speech, he places advertising as "the act which asserts and secures the scenic ground by implying that who we are, in essence, is the keeper, *the natural owner*, of the scene." So the

attempt to claim the self and the knowable scene as property exists in a contrary relationship with obscenity: "owning's failure is the beginning of poetic knowing."

Using the example of a TV ad for Jockey underwear, whose key marketing slogan is "genuine people," Wenderoth reads the claim for being genuine (by donning Jockey underwear) as a claim for fully realized subjectivity: "being one of the pre-destined keepers of the scene—being one whose knowing is really an owning." While the ad asserts that there is a "genuine State" available (analogous to the power of the State as a political unit), it also suggests that (without Jockey) viewers are "in danger of inauthenticity." In other words, the ad generates in viewers a fear of being left behind, lacking access to the authentic realm, the correct class, the true identity, and simultaneously, the ad "is a warding off of poetic knowledge" because it ignores the power of refusing to possess a genuine self.

Wenderoth boldly argues that advertising's unwillingness to engage obscenity is "not different in essence—than most of the 'poems' written by Americans in the last thirty years." He goes on to do close readings of two already-classic poems attached to the "genuine State": Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark" and Hass's "Meditation at Lagunitis." In both poems, the speakers may acknowledge or even experience a "sudden intimacy with obscenity," but finally these speakers resume their possession of the "scenic ground"; rather than remaining fully in the poetic knowledge of the obscene, "this kind of poet...wants to *have been* there, and to be able to prove...that he has been there, and has withstood it" ("Obscenery" 33).

Finding an alternative to these safe poems in a passage from the Faulkner novel, *As I Lay Dying*, Wenderoth implicitly urges us to let go of genre expectations when searching for a poetic speech that's really willing to live in danger. In this analysis, Wenderoth highlights the necessary ambiguity of his poetics, clearing space for both the negative and the positive gesture. A full engagement with obscenity, he says, is not "merely a dissipation of scenic ground or of the kind of I who intended to dwell there." Along with that negation, this poetics also produces "a new

ground, a new being...a knowledge which is never the possession or act of the pre-existing subject—but rather, is the knowing which acts upon the subject" ("Obscenery" 33). What Wenderoth does so convincingly here is make an epistemological intervention: he proposes a new knowledge of knowledge, a knowing that doesn't belong to the subject as a product of his free will—a knowing that exists in an unfixed, unstable relationship with the one who knows.

I'd like to position spectral poetics as a complement to the poetics of obscenery, a theoretical neighbor that's more skeptical of oppositional thinking, and more anxiously attuned to the possibility that the fragmented, partial, unknowable self can be, and increasingly is, subsumed by the commodity form and consumer culture. The Jockey ad cited by Wenderoth makes an overt claim for the genuine, but I find lots of advertising these days to be more interested in associating with instability, absurdity, mystery—values that could certainly be found in obscenery. I don't disagree that all advertisements finally refer to the stable scene of what they're selling, but I think it's also true that ads are increasingly skilled and effective at appearing *not* to refer to a stable commodity at all. In other words, advertising increasingly presents itself as a liberation from advertising; it understands that viewers have a certain reverence for obscenery, that conformity, stability, and conventional modes of representation have declining cultural capital. Even if consumers, are unwilling to remain in the obscene, they're certainly willing to purchase commodities that appear to allow some access to the obscene.

Wenderoth does briefly address this tricky aspect of his poetics in his essay, "The Holy Spirit of Life." Here he tries to parse the difference between the "popular" uses of the obscene and "good poems," and gets a bit bogged down, I think, in oppositional rhetoric:

This is not to say that reverences of the obscene are diminishing—if anything, they are growing by leaps and bounds. Popular reverences of the obscene, however, are milder, less intentional, easier to access and at the same time easier to conceal from ourselves; such reverences, unlike good poems, are less likely to

create the sense that one has intentionally or meaningfully opposed the project of Conventional reverence. Poetic speech, when it is indeed poetic speech, is unique in how intentionally and how passionately it evokes a situation that cannot be resolved or entirely understood.... (31)

The challenge considered by this passage is really a primary challenge for any contemporary American poetics. The challenge could be framed as a question: how do we write poetry when that which opposes poetry increasingly appears as poetic? Wenderoth may be correct in what he says, but it's also correct that our present system of capital and power is largely devoted to producing and consuming many values associated with the poetic. This means that advertisements, for example, become ever more effective at presenting themselves as intentional, passionate, meaningful, and intense—all those qualities that are supposed to distinguish good poetry from the popular.

A spectral poetics recognizes that opposition itself has to be reconceived, that poetic speech cannot simply take another position in the field of oppositions and social battles, that it must remain transient, ghost-like, haunting the field without attaching to any one place of authority or authenticity. Just as we conceive a kind of knowing that acts upon the one who knows, perhaps we can conceive an opposing that acts upon the one who opposes. In other words, opposition itself cannot possess its position, it must become a process of *depositioning*, not only deposing other positions of power, but also deposing its own position, haunting the field of position taking without taking a position itself. I think the poetics of obscenity is implicitly sympathetic to such a depositioning process, particularly when conceived as "the practice of saying goodbye to one's self, and to the place of one's self"; nonetheless, the very term "obscenity" keeps tempting us to visualize a place taking a polemic position against "scenic ground." The concept of the specter orients more toward the speaker of poetic speech, or the

process of speaking as a process of giving up positions, of haunting the field of power without forming fully corporeal attachments.

A curious coda brings the essay, "Obscenery," to a close. Here again Wenderoth argues that poetry in our current historical moment has embraced the "unified subject of the genuine State" and has infiltrated our institutions, where the followers of Stafford and Hass flourish, and real poetic speech, reverent of the obscene, is ignored or reviled. Wenderoth appears to be questioning the boom in academic Creative Writing programs, but then he makes an unexpected move: "What is necessary now is not the poets' exodus from the university, but the renewed presence of the power of poetic speech—a revolutionary power, to be sure—within the university, which is to say, 'within the position' out of which social and historical activity unfolds" (35). That Wenderoth refuses to join the chorus of academy bashers suggests that what he understands by "obscenery" and poetic speech is not inevitably and absolutely contrary to institutional sites like the Creative Writing classroom, even if that classroom has tended in recent decades to reproduce the unified, genuine subject. This is a crucial component of a contemporary poetics, avoiding the impulse to claim the Romanticized position of authorial authority, either outside or inside the university, claiming instead the potential for a poetics of obscenery to be "something we are forever in the process of conjuring" (35).

What Wenderoth glosses over here is the possibility that the Creative Writing industry's boom may be caused not so much by the desire of students to possess the "genuine State" but to possess that particular form of the "genuine State" that presents itself as obscenery. In other words, Creative Writing may be especially attractive to students as a site to practice blurring the lines between unified, stable self and the fragmented, fluid self, a skill set that could be equally valuable to an aspiring poet or an aspiring advertiser. What a spectral poetics requires is that students be required to understand the historical and social conditions of their poetic production. In other words, they must understand why poetry and advertising appear to have much in

common in our post-industrial economy, and why poetic language has become such a powerful productive force in this late stage of capital.

Postlude 6.0

Superfluous Hands

Hence [Capital] diminishes labour time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition—question of life or death—for the necessary.

--Karl Marx
Grundrisse (706)

My mother went to Hawaii and sent me a t-shirt that says, “no worries.” When Marx says that a table has grotesque ideas coming out of its wooden brain, I wonder if he imagines my t-shirt from Hawaii. My mother probably knows that I don’t really need more t-shirts, so what she sent me is a message, and wearing the t-shirt, I send the message to those who read it. What is this message? That I worry too much but would prefer to be worry free? That already I am proudly worry free? Whatever the message, clearly it’s meant to be sent to the t-shirt’s readership. Marx knew that people want not just things but ideas, and being productive, he produced many ideas during his life. Sadly, he did not know how to relax. He was worried that he would die before producing his last idea. I too am worried that what I’m writing now is insignificant. Or that its failure to signify will receive poor evaluations. I’m surrounded by a house that is surrounded by snow. We are so far from Hawaii. I can hear the furnace click on in the basement. The air temperature tells the thermostat to tell the furnace to ignite its burners to heat the water that circulates through the copper tubes through the radiators that surround me. Heat radiates to my skin, and my blood circulates through my body. I am warm and have done nothing to produce this warmth. I am kept alive by machines. Therefore I have free time, therefore I produce ideas. The air temperature reaches the desired degree, and the furnace clicks off. I stop writing. My hands rest on the wooden table.

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