

PREFACE

In the following pages, I argue that Uncreative Writing is not quite the thing that either its defenders or its detractors say it is. As a set of practices, it is not in itself aesthetically or politically revolutionary, nor is it socially reactionary. It is not the last hideout of unconscious white privilege nor does it mark the birth of a true gift economy. Instead, I argue that it mounts an interesting and telling critique of its own avant-garde situation. It does not eschew expression as such and is thus not the enemy of empathy. Quite the opposite—it can be seen as giving voice to what Theodor Adorno, whom I invoke a good deal (although in a cause that he would not necessarily approve), called “suffering nature.” Along a similar line, I attempt to demonstrate that Uncreative Writing looks beyond our foreshortened notion of subjectivity to that subjectivity’s proper end, the fulfillment of the subject’s normative—utopian—promise. In short, I see Uncreative Writing as an interesting chapter in the history of the American lyric poetry that it appears to react against.

I do not wish to present myself as a thumping advocate for Uncreative Writing. There is a good deal of it that I like and a good deal of it that I have no taste for. But I do want to give it a fair shake, just as I would like to give all poetry a fair shake, especially the stuff that I don’t particularly identify with. In a recent article, Bob Archambeau reflects on how outmoded our poetry wars have become. They persist as an avatism from a time when such competition actually made a material difference.¹ In our present dispensation—in an age in which the National Endowment for the Humanities is due to be eliminated, in which the Common Core gives the shortest shrift to what we might quaintly call “imaginative literature,” and

in which both the reading and the writing of poetry have been sidelined by a renewed emphasis on what is equally quaintly called “career-readiness”—it makes more sense to find common cause and common ground in poetry. After all, many of us have bet our livelihoods if not our lives on it, and the narcissism of small differences should not blind us to our shared interest in asserting our larger similarities.

I have been working on *Reading Uncreative Writing* for about five years. The writing of the all-important first draft was made possible by a study leave, for which I thank the Provost of George Mason University and my Chair, Debra L. Shutika.

The work has mostly, by necessity, been solitary. But I have enjoyed it immensely, in no small part because I have been able to correspond with and talk to a number of people whom I would like to consider as friends, even if I have not yet met them all in person.

My special thanks go to Bob Archambeau, David Buuck, Charles Bernstein, Craig Dworkin, Jacob Edmond, Andrew Epstein, Rob Fitterman, Jim Hyde, Kent Johnson, Israel Kassim, Daniel Morris, Mark Scroggins and Roger Lathbury. I would also like to acknowledge the fierce generosity of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, who edited this book as her last in this series.

Reading Uncreative Writing took as long as it did to write because I took as little time as I was able away from the general busyness of family life. As I get older I am increasingly convinced that, in the end, it is that which endures. Accordingly, my deepest love and greatest thanks go to my wife, Sharon Squassoni, and to my daughters, Zoe and Lucia Kaufmann, who were kids when this started and who are kids no longer. I hope I have not tried your patience. If I have, I hope you understand.

Earlier versions of Chapters 3 and 5 appeared in *Postmodern Culture* and *Tripwire*. My thanks to those journals and their editors for their hospitality.

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NOTE

Robert Archambeau, “Hating the Other Kind of Poetry,” *Copper Nickel*, accessed March 14, 2017, <http://copper-nickel.org/hating-the-other-kind-of-poetry/>.

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