

author's note

This short book has been long a'borning. It was engendered by my column in the *New York Times* "Writers on Writing" series called "From Echoes Emerge Original Voices" (June 21, 1999), which described a course I was then teaching called "Strategies in Prose." The fifth chapter here reprints a version of that syllabus. That "strategy" in turn produced "In Praise of Imitation," an article in *Harper's Magazine* as long ago as July 2002. It further served as a basis for the introductory material to a textbook titled *The Sincerest Form: Writing Fiction by Imitation* (McGraw-Hill, 2003). The opening passage of Chapter 2 repeats some of the argument of *The Sincerest Form*; it has been my hobbyhorse for years.

I first taught "Strategies in Prose" at Bennington College in the early 1980s, then variations on that theme at Columbia University and the University of Michigan in the decades since. By now I've preached this particular gospel to hundreds of undergraduate and graduate students, many of whom have gone on to successful careers as writers and some of whom have taught the course in

their respective institutions. In 2015—just short of half a century after my first foray into the classroom—I retired with the jaw-cracking title of Robert Frost Distinguished University Professor of English Language and Literature, and Professor Emeritus of English Language and Literature, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan. Enough’s enough.

Yet the art of writing still seems to me to be grounded in an act of imitation: mimesis rules the form. It’s time now to revisit the idea of reproduction and yoke it to the larger question of originality. Though I intend to concentrate on the creative mode in language, the issue feels germane as well to any discussion of music or the visual arts, not to mention our culture writ large. We value, as a culture, both the mass-produced artifact and the craftsman-like “one of a kind.” The false opposition of *teacher* and *student* seems a case in point. If one ideal of democracy is full participation and “the more the merrier,” there’s a concomitant ideal of being singled out and standing up alone. How to reconcile that thesis and antithesis is my project here.

Excerpts from these chapters have been published in *AWP: The Writer’s Chronicle* (February 2018) and my column, “Talking about Books,” of *Michigan Today* at the University of Michigan. At the excellent urging of John Donatich and Sarah Miller of Yale University Press, I have expanded the topic to address the more general titular question of “why writing matters” at all. Its role is worth the pondering; its history, the recounting. To have had the occasion to do so has been, for me, a gift.