

CHAPTER 5: SELF WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM

I think any experienced instructor or professor recognizes a rigorous course, when s/he teaches one. On the other hand, what counts as rigorous to our students may be different from what counts as such to us. After more than a decade teaching, I am still surprised, for example, when I receive student evaluations for a couple of my lower-level writing courses that laud the depth of class discussions—especially given that I still find the work we do in those courses to be stilted and frustrating, as I struggle to accurately assess and to push my students' engagement in them. Consequently, for my part, I think it wise to have taught a few upper-level courses in self writing before introducing the concept in a lower-level writing course. That way, you can figure out where you're going, so to speak, in the larger writing curriculum, what you want students to be able to manage in a capstone self writing course, and you can work back from there to help them to that end. For example, after trying out self writing twice in upper level creative nonfiction courses (a 300-level and a 400-level), I began teaching a unit of self writing, using primarily the works of Seneca as models, in our introductory-level personal essay course. I found that at least a few students in the course seemed to “get it” and were invested in the practices; in fact, they continued with the curriculum. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I am offering insights about, a framework for, teaching materials for, and student essays from upper-level personal essay courses that center in the practices of self writing almost exclusively.

Obviously, the two most important practices in a self writing course are reading and writing. Both practices, though, must enable meditation—not simply reading for content or writing to argue for a particular interpretation of a text or for a particular perspective on an issue. Again, this is one of the reasons why an upper-level course in self writing works well: by the time they take the course, students have likely already progressed in their reading capabilities beyond the practice of simply reading for comprehension. Too, I find that I don't have to sell them on the value of writing-to-explore an idea. They are generally open to, excited about, the prospect of writing-to-explore, instead of writing-to-argue. My job, then, becomes one of raising their awareness of the reading and writing practices they already participate in, amplifying any meditative practices that might work in those reading/writing practices, and pushing them beyond their limits—in particular, the limits that have been imposed by our course curriculum and by the core-beliefs that mark the boundaries between student and

scholar. In order to accomplish all of this work, I use three strategies: 1. I ask self writing students to read demanding and difficult texts; 2. I ask them to practice an intensified reading-writing relationship; and 3. I ask them debate with me (to affirm and to challenge) the concepts and claims rendered in the texts they read and produce.

As such, I have upper-level essay students read difficult, contemplative, even polemical works—works that are generally reserved for the experts, for scholars. Notably, these are works that are not chosen according to their canonical value or according to whether they will turn up on the GRE. Too, I don't have them move through those texts in a single day or in a week, like we do in our literary theory course or in our upper-level rhetoric and writing course. Instead, we take such texts at about ten pages per class period—and sometimes (especially when we are reading Nietzsche) much less, e.g., 2-3 pages per class period. We also return to those texts repeatedly, throughout the course of the semester. In short, I don't worry about how much they are reading in these courses; I worry about *how* they are reading. In reading such texts at a much slower pace, students learn to read like scholars, to take their time with the texts, to struggle through them, to focus (like scholars do) on a single word or phrase for as long as it takes for them to make that word/phrase do some work for them.

I want for my students to mimic the deliberate and attentive reading practices of scholars, but in order to explain what deliberateness and attentiveness look like, I point to imitation practices in the ancient world. Of reading, Quintilian states, “For a long time, too, none but the best authors must be read, and such as are least likely to mislead him who trust them; but they must be read with attention, and indeed with almost as much care as if we were transcribing them [...]” (129; book X, ch. 1, sec. 20).³⁷ The key to Quintilian's call lies in his assertion that we read “as if we were actually transcribing what we read.” The practice of reading works in tandem with writing-in-response to those readings.

By building on any effort to transcribe the work of another (the “already said”) into their own writings and within the context of their own questions, students will find themselves essaying in the meditative ways I've described in Chapter 4. The essays they produce, then, will not be the navel-gazing essays we are used to seeing in creative nonfiction courses. Instead of “pursu[ing] the unspeakable,” “reveal[ing] the hidden,” or “say[ing] the unsaid,” as Foucault characterizes the work of confessional writing (like the contemporary personal essay), the self writing essay is an attempt at “captur[ing] the already said,” “collect[ing] what one has managed to hear of read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self” (“Self-Writing” 211).³⁸

To help students into this very different relationship with texts, I require my students to keep an Annotation Notebook, which is a variation of the *hupom-*

nēmata, meant to enable a reading-writing connection, which in turn enables the “shaping of the self.” This practice serves as the foundation for the work they will do throughout the semester. I begin my self writing course with Longinus’s *On the Sublime*, and after the first class discussion of the first ten pages of the text, I assign the Annotation Notebook. Here is a copy of the Annotation Notebook Assignment:

Directions: Please annotate the readings due for each class period in your Annotation Notebooks, following the guidelines below. Tasks numbered 1-3 can be addressed in any order you wish.

1. List key concepts, and as best you can, define them.
2. Explain, in your own words, the major question that the writer is exploring.
3. List key claims regarding that question (e.g., claims that answer, frame/contextualize, or complicate the question).
4. Note any insights in the text that you find to be interesting (e.g., insights that are compelling, curious, infuriating) in the following way: first, copy the passage in which you encountered the insight; then, reflect on the insight in one of two ways—by simply jotting a quick “note to self” about why it’s interesting, or by freewriting in response to the passage. I should see at least one freewrite to one insight in each notebook entry.

In class, we use tasks 1-3 to guide the first half of the class period’s discussion. In the first week or two, I stick to that guide closely. Only when I am sure that the students are grasping the key concepts, major question(s), etc., in each of the texts, will I move away from this format and begin class, instead, by unpacking a few of the denser or more problematic passages that I’ve selected. In addition, for the first couple of weeks with any text, we shift in the last half of class to task number four in their notebooks, and it is here that I see most clearly the creation of a relationship of oneself to oneself in my students’ work.

For example, in Chapter 3 of *On the Sublime*, Longinus argues that false sentiment is one kind of writing defect that “militate[s] against sublimity.” He states, “[false sentiment] is hollow emotionalism where emotion is not called for, or immoderate passion where restraint is what is needed. For writers are often

carried away, as though by drunkenness, in outbursts of emotion which are not relevant to the matter in hand, but are wholly personal, and hence tedious” (103). A few semesters ago, a student in one of my self writing courses wrote about this insight repeatedly in her Annotation Notebook, returning to it again and again, even as we moved to other texts that were investigating different concerns. In her final essay for the course, Longinus’s insight served as material for an extended meditation in which she arrived at a new insight about her own artistic work. Specifically, this student turned her attention to her experiences with a painting she had created in the past and had shown in a local coffee shop, a painting that had frustrated her so much that she eventually took it back from the shop and stashed it under her bed, where it still sat, because she found that though she had created it in a fit of despair, it was consistently read by audiences as a symbol of hope. In her extended meditation, she eventually found that she had failed to convey the proper emotion because of the wholly personal and immoderately passionate conveyance of emotion and that her audience’s inability to read the proper emotion in it felt like a betrayal, not only by that audience but by the art and by her self, as an artist.

I read this extended meditation as an example of one writer working in relation to her self on the page, through the truth test and the unification practices of self writing. Basically, she tested and integrated the “truth” forwarded by Longinus in regards to her own work, negotiating conceptions of her self-as-artist and her self-as-feeling, among others. Though she was working through a question (“why did the piece fail?”), the meditation served not only as a practice through which she could think-on-the-page, but it also served as a practice in which that self-on-the-page spoke back to her, as insight gave way to insight and relation to relation, until she came away from the exercise with a different sense of her self—as artist, as writer, as feeling-person.

I should note that I only discuss the “self-to-self” relation with my students in conceptual terms before they begin to draft their essays. I find that the concept is a tangle for them and only seems to confuse their writing processes, until they have generated an extended meditation which they, then, can engage and revise. At that point, they are able to recall and to experience the self-to-self relation that Foucault describes. Too, they are able to reflect on it in their journals (in which I ask them to freewrite each day at the end of class). In the end, many of my students have commented that it felt as though they met another self in writing—a self that may have been, in turns, fearful and tentative, thoughtful and capable. They often tell me that they believe they became stronger writers for it. I have always found that I have had to agree them.

I firmly believe that much of that strength comes, too, from my working to push these students beyond the limits I mentioned earlier and from them

working so hard to reach beyond those limits. As I've explained, I push them, in part, by asking them to engage with difficult texts, like Longinus's *On the Sublime*. Admittedly, over the years, I've had colleagues advise me not to teach the philosophers, scholars, and essayists I love because, according to my colleagues, the teaching will spoil that love in failing to transfer to my students. I think I have felt that frustration before, though only with particular students who, in my most arrogant and dangerous moments, I believed could be helped or healed by reading a particular text. For the most part, I don't experience that "spoiling," though, and I suspect that this is because I include the Annotation Notebook and considerable (tough and demanding) debate in self writing courses. I'd love to sit in coffee shops and bars and debate with my peers the tenets of Nietzsche's and Levinas's and Derrida's work, like I did as a graduate student, but now, as I see it, my job is to carry that work into the classroom. This is what my graduate school professors did for me; I do it, now, for my students, graduate and undergraduate, alike.

Again, debate looks very different in a lower-level writing course than it does in an upper-level essay course, but my point here is to say that we don't have to be afraid for ourselves or for our students in bringing difficult and even our most-loved texts into the course; in fact, I think we limit our students' development, as thinkers and writers, when we deprive them of such experiences. My upper-level essay students are, quite simply, exhilarating (and often exhilarated) in their engagement with difficult texts, and I'll note that I don't teach at an ivy league or Research 1 university. My very positive experience is, in part, due to the fact that my colleagues do an excellent job training our students to read closely and thoughtfully (one of the great benefits of working in an English department). As one of only two Rhetoric and Composition Ph.D.s in our department, it then falls to me to teach our students to write beyond formulas. By the time I see them in an upper-level essay course, they are, I find, well trained, but perhaps too well trained—they are good at reading closely, good at writing in formulas, and they have come to accept that they cannot do anything else as good English majors and/or writing minors.

I believe—and I will provide evidence in this chapter of the fact—that students are fully capable of working productively with texts that continue to confound and frustrate, as well as entice and inspire, the very best scholars writing in the Humanities today. I dwell on this point at length here because I have found that it is only through this level of intensity in engaging with texts that students can practice self writing. In working with a group of upper-level essay students who know the value of exploration and who are beginning to believe that they, too, can interpret the work and make it do some work for them, the dense text begins to open itself. If they haven't already experienced it, self writing students

come to know the depth of that experience: how our engagement with a text can reshape us; how that engagement is a process of frustration and pleasure, of confusion and realization; how that engagement draws us together, as a class, and how it becomes deeply personal and private, even as we are working together; how that engagement makes us feel stupid and brilliant in turns; and how, in the end, working with such texts is like learning to build a boat with what sometimes feels like a plethora of nails and no hammer—until we’ve figured out how to make a hammer from the exercise itself.

Some of the texts I’ve used in these courses have been Longinus’s *On the Sublime*, Nietzsche’s “Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” his *Genealogy of Morals*, *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and *Ecce Homo*. I’ve used Richard Miller’s *Writing at the End of the World* and Laura Kipnis’s *Against Love*. In the next self writing course I teach, I will incorporate works by Kenneth Burke. I use texts that confound me, but that I’ve also found to be revelations in each reading. With each of these texts, I find myself saying to my students, “Here’s something about which I have no idea what to think. What do you think of it?” It is in such moments, too, that I often reach back into my writing training to a perhaps surprising exercise—the freewrite.

I typically ask students to freewrite when I anticipate that they will have strong feelings/beliefs about an issue—e.g., when Nietzsche claims that God is dead in *The Gay Science*. I ask for them to freewrite when I have a question I can’t yet begin to formulate for them for discussion—e.g., something about Miller’s insight into how we internalize socially sanctioned moralities and how Kipnis’s polemic fails to undo that internalization, because of something about the internalization process, itself. Or, I ask them to freewrite when I feel like we’ve gotten too far away from their essays and I want them to have a chance to trace connections. As a rule, I don’t grade freewrites. I tell students that if they’d like me to see the freewrites, then they may turn them in; however, the freewrites are only intended to help students to consider claims, to test ideas, to draw connections. Too, as I mentioned above, in the freewrite, they have the opportunity to address and acknowledge their initial emotional responses to what are often polemical statements, which I believe is essential to their success in the course. If they have a strong emotional response, there must be a safe space for them to articulate it—and to work their way through it.

I have found that the freewrite is so useful to the self writing course that I require all of us, including myself, to keep Freewriting Journals and to write in them at least once during each class meeting. As such, this is another way, like the use of debate, in which the work of the course becomes a more collaborative effort; the students see me working along with them to explore ideas and sort out feelings. That’s not to say that I’m not the teacher; I am both teacher and

mentor in such a course. However, this (collaborative effort) is just as important as the use of challenging readings in the self writing course: students must be encouraged to take ownership of the work of the course. The Freewriting Journal, when one is maintained by each class member (including the teacher), can assist in that goal. In short, in seeing me do what I'm asking them to do, students will not only understand but are more likely to be convinced of the value of the work—e.g., that freewriting *is*, actually, a scholarly practice; that it is as useful to me as I tell them it should be to them.

To sum up, then, these are the common assignments (and practices) in my self writing courses that I've discussed so far:

- Demanding readings, treated in short sections
- The Annotation Notebook
- The Freewriting Journal
- Class Discussion—which really works more like debate in that students are invited to affirm and to challenge claims and concepts (made in a text, by peers, or by me)

This list leaves just two more essential assignments for any self writing course:

- Formal essays
- Workshops of peer essays

MEDITATION AS ESSAYING (AND VICE VERSA)

Of course, the essay, itself, should be a practice of meditation, of self writing, as has been shown in Chapter 3. However, I find that I can't simply offer students an essay assignment that asks them to participate in all of the practices of self writing right away. I have to do some work around the concept of subjectivity in the essay with them first. To do so and, simultaneously, to create a bridge between the reading and writing practices that I've explained above and the self writing practices I'll eventually ask them to participate in for their essays, I have, in the past, offered an essay assignment that centers in the practice of imitation. This assignment enables students' reflection on the practice of imitation within the particular conceptions of subjectivity I've presented in Chapters 1-3. Here's an example of such an essay assignment:

For this essay assignment, you will try your hand at the kind of exercise many of your essay-parents practice(d)—imitation. I will give you a copy of one of Samuel Johnson's essays from *The Rambler*. Johnson is perhaps the most famous essayist of the 18th Century. I thought of Johnson's work because of your writings and our ongoing discussions of writing practices and

voice [I use Johnson's essay No. 2. Saturday, 24 March 1750].

I'd like you to imitate the section assigned to you. Make his expression your expression. This means you'll have to figure out what, exactly, he is doing in essaying. What concept/belief/issue is he expressing or exploring? How is he doing so? Stick closely to what you think he's doing. For example, if he explores a topic, by using a personal anecdote, you do the same by using a personal anecdote. If he criticizes a political belief, you do so.

You don't have to change every word in every section to make the expression yours. For example, in the first sentence of the essay, Johnson is talking about the mind. You, too, can use the word "mind," but you will have to find your own way of arguing, "That the mind of man is never satisfied...." (if arguing is what you think he's doing, of course).

Imitation is a difficult exercise, sometimes tedious, sometimes overwhelming. This is one essay assignment that students most consistently suffer over. So, start early, and talk to me if you have any questions or concerns.

My students always (and often, passionately) agree that the exercise is difficult. They find that they've had to read and reread the essay many times, to look up lots of words, and to draft over and over again their imitative essays. This exercise is, of course, an act of meditation, and in it, they are not only trying to grasp the content of Johnson's essay but are also trying to rewrite it so that the imitation does what the original does and the way that the original does it—which means that they have to figure out not only what the essay's content is but how it works (e.g., via inquiry or argument or skepticism or confession).

Inevitably, given the essay's relationship to the essayist, the question of what constitutes the self comes to the forefront of the work. Students who believe that the self-on-the-page, i.e., the voice, is a reflection of their essential self will often state that the assignment is unfair or even impossible because Johnson's essay must be an expression of who he is; therefore, any imitation, consequently, is going to fail at doing what he did. Too, the student cannot express his/her true self, if s/he is confined to doing so by writing about and in the same ways as another writer. If, on the other hand, the student believes that his/her self-on-the-page is a social construct, then students tend to argue that the exercise is something like acting, where s/he tries to appropriate the truths and writing

practices in Johnson's work and render them via the student's particular social persona—twisting them according to the writer's own gender, class, race, etc. In this framework, the question for the writer might become, "How does a white, middle-class female define 'the mind'?" However, in this conception of the self-on-the-page, my students always conclude that reconstructing social categories works too much like stereotyping and, thus, seems overly simplistic and dangerous. If one were to take seriously Foucault's version of subjectivity, though, then the exercise would be totally different—a kind of "thought experiment" and one in which the writer might participate in his/her own "shaping" via his/her work with the text.

What I love about this exercise is that no matter what conception of self the writer is invested in, the exercise works as a practice of meditation—because of the reading and writing required just to arrive at a decision about the conception of self that will inform the student's work. As one who is invested in the third version of subjectivity because of its productiveness in enabling debate, in enabling engagement and, even, change, I also like this exercise because it makes very clear to student essayists that the essay, when it is freed of the confines of the essential or socially constructed self, can be intensely generative, even when it is written via the practice of imitation. They see that, for example, when Johnson speaks of men's minds never being satisfied, the student essayist could create an imitative essay by testing this "truth," using some of the tactics Johnson does (e.g., through the use of example or inversion). But, the imitation would be meditative. The student could write, using the strategies Johnson does and covering the topics Johnson does, in order to test his methods and his claims—even his questions and the gaps in his work.

In preparation for this assignment, I would recommend studying these three versions of subjectivity and their implications with students. I usually use the above assignment later in the course, and as such, I emphasize in any conversation about the essay assignment the various conceptions of subjectivity and how they might determine the work each student does. That way, students can decide which conception of subjectivity they will be working within in imitating the text. This conversation (or more realistically, series of conversations) also helps to open up in compelling ways the next step in the process—workshopping the essays.

One of the first questions I ask of the student essayists who are invested in the concept of the essential self is how a reader can determine whether the text is an accurate expression of the writer. As many writing teachers and scholars have noted, it's clear that the reader can't, so the question becomes: what is the reader's role, then? How is that role helpful, and how is it limiting? I push them, too, to think about the reader as one who is not only an assessor or critic, but one

who is reading for many other reasons (e.g., pleasure, competition, etc.). This expansion of the student's conception of the reader also invites the question of what one gets from reading someone else's essential self.

The second option—that the text is the socially constructed self of the writer—is equally complex and has just as many (and profound) proliferative effects, for as my students quickly point out, they are very often not able to tell from the text the writer's race, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or his/her gender. They find that, as readers, they are imposing these categories on the text, based on what they know of the flesh-and-blood writer whose name is attached to the piece—a practice few seem comfortable with, when they become aware of it. Too, the question of what one can get from an essay that is the construction of another writer's self comes up: such an essay can offer individuals, particularly those of marginalized groups, a vision of a self that may not be available to them in mainstream media and in academic discourse; however, as I've argued in Chapter 2, that vision is of a category—or a series of categories—of self, which is limiting (and potentially dangerous in that limiting).

In the third option, if readers critique the student essay based on how well it engages with the truths forwarded and the practices at work in Johnson's essays, then they are practicing a different kind of critique. Granted, students tend to flounder in figuring out what the practices are in Johnson's essay, but this is where I put them together in groups and let them figure it out together. After reading the essay on their own, working through it with peers, and thinking through the subjectivity question, they are so familiar with Johnson's essay that they are able to move rather quickly through their peers' essays to identify any imitation of Johnson's practices in each. For example, they can easily identify the use of quotes, the explicit references to the reader, and the subsequent challenges to claims made earlier in the essay.

In the end, they have the opportunity to explore—even at the personal level—the various conceptions of subjectivity and what each means for the writer's relationship to the page, to its content, to the writing practices the student participated in while making that page, and to any critique of his/her work (as well as to his/her critique of others' work). As one might easily imagine, the exploration of all of these relationships in which the writer works and is constituted also gives students the opportunity to explore the complexities of other relations: e.g., writer-text-reader-context relations. Meaning is complicated in all of those relations and in ways that are so pronounced that students begin to see just how mutable meaning is, as well as what might be at work to make one meaning more customary than others.

In a similar way, I like to give students the same text to read at different times over the course of the semester so that they can see how the meanings (and

even the strategies) of the text mutate according to what we've read, what we've talked about and written about, what is going on in their lives, etc. For example, one of the first assignments that I give in my essay classes is to ask students to read Nietzsche's "Truth and Lies in the Nonmoral Sense." Then, at the end of course, they return to the same essay and read it again. Their experience with it changes with each reading. I would argue, in fact, that their experience with it expands with each reading because the meditation intensifies. This practice becomes especially important when pushing students beyond imitation exercises like the one I included above into what, I think, are more sophisticated meditative exercises.

For example, here's another essay assignment which asks for students to imitate the mode of engagement in other works. This kind of assignment, I use not primarily to test the implications of writers' buy-in to particular conceptions of subjectivity but in order to further help them into the practices of self writing. Through it, I try to push them out of their "comfort zones" and encourage them to try out some of the practices ("the methods," as I refer to them in the assignment) that other creative nonfiction writers use. In such ways, I'm asking them to practice self writing (practicing the disparate and unification, for example) without bogging them down in Foucault's terminology. Here's a sample assignment:

Your second essay for this course should explore a particular topic/question, using at least one of the methods of exploration we've seen used in the texts we've read so far in class and responding to a series of outside sources that also engage, on some level, with your topic. You might use Plato's dialectical method; you might practice relentless skepticism, like Nietzsche; you might create a fragmented text and position the fragments in ways that cultivate connections and raise questions among seemingly disparate parts, like Miller. Depending on what method of exploration you use, the incorporation of those outside sources should work within that method. For example, if you are practicing skepticism in the essay, then even if you initially use one source to critique another, you'll eventually be critiquing ideas presented in all of your chosen sources.

You'll notice that I introduce this as the second essay assignment students write for this particular self writing course; the first essay assignment in the course asks them to engage at length with, by examining multiple perspectives on, a topic that comes out of the class readings and/or discussion. In the first

assignment, I'm essentially asking them to experiment with the truth test, which I first explained in Chapter 3. I offer these assignments in this order so that students can, if they so choose, revise the first essay by, essentially, breaking its backbone and reworking it through a different series of practices that, consequently, create a different essay.

The first time I offered this assignment, I was impressed with the work the students produced. I'm including here a sample essay, produced by one such student. To my knowledge, he had little training in creative nonfiction/the personal essay when he walked into the course. He was a quiet and thoughtful student: he rarely talked in class, but he was always there, scribbling in his Freewriting Journal. Here's the essay he wrote in response to the prompt above:

Cameron Markway
4530 words

Understanding We

The darkness isn't as bad as I once thought. My eyes can adjust to anything. The light only distracts from the actual knowing of an object. After all, isn't vision a liar, making me see what I wish, altering my interpretations of events? Do I actually *see* what is in front of me? And what about you? Are you able to see the light, or are you "overwhelmed by the sun's beams?" (Plato 65). Perhaps darkness is more of a friend than we believe, or perhaps not. The choice is not up to us anymore, is it?

Before birth. This is when it doesn't matter; this is when it matters most. This is when understanding of who we are is already packed into the yet-to-be-born vessel of ourselves. It is that darkness that we identify with, living forever around us and inside of us. We don't remember it; we can't comprehend it, but it is at this time that we are the most complete. We recognize every aspect of ourselves without even consciously recognizing it. We *are* every part of ourselves. There is no need to consciously recognize the good and the bad within us before our delivery into the realm outside of the womb. It is the introduction to the light that triggers the loss. We are no longer part of ourselves, no longer known only to ourselves.

Upon our introduction into the world, we become part of everyone else. We are for our family. We are for our friends. We are for all others. We have lost what it means to be our *self*.

The feeling presents itself in the form of a headache, a dull throbbing that is never quite painful but never quite pleasant. It spawns recognition within me of my lack of understanding. One of those unexplainable feelings of doubt and unworthiness that all of those emo bands tend to sing about, presented in the form of a question that has been contemplated by stoners probably from the first time marijuana was used as a drug: Who am I, man?

The question carries more baggage than the new Boeing 787 Dreamliner, baggage that keeps regenerating every time one piece is removed. Not even the most adept baggage handler would be able to unload a cargo hold containing this large of a load. I, being the feeblest of all these metaphorical workmen, will not fool myself into thinking that I will be able to unload even the smallest portion of this luggage, but at least I can try to unload a couple bags and deliver them to a location that might fit. After all, even if I do send an item to the “wrong” location, that item can either be repacked and sent back or made to work for whomever it was sent to. There is no correct destination for the luggage in this mentally constructed airport; it can get tossed around and delivered a thousand times to the same location without a single complaint, or it can be delivered once and disappear.

Nothing is for certain; nothing is not for certain. We are an enigma to ourselves, more clearly and more falsely seen through the eyes of others than through our own eyes. We just keep refilling with the thoughts of others, the thoughts of our own creation (if that is possible). We just keep getting

tossed around in the cargo hold of our minds, never really discovering, never really finding the correct destination for this thought or that thought. We just keep being ourselves without knowing what ourselves are.

It was easier for me as a child. My identity was my name and a list of what I liked and what I did not like.

-Hi, my name is Cameron.

-Hello, Cameron.

-I like football, hunting, candy, and cartoons.

-Thank you, Cameron. You may take your seat.

What a fantastic way to view the world. This was me. I was football. I was hunting. I was candy. And I was cartoons. I was Cameron. Period. It was never complicated. My parents would hang my pictures of fish on the refrigerator with tape. This is how I knew I was awesome. Tape was never fun to take off of a refrigerator. My pictures deserved the extra effort. This is how I understood the world around me: This gets me recognition, so I will keep doing this in order to get recognition.

-I got an A on my book report, Mom.

-Good job, son. Here is a piece of candy.

-Thanks.

-Now run along and play.

My identity took shape. I had become a product of the reward-punishment system. I was like Pavlov's dog, conditioned to drool at the thought of a picture on the refrigerator or a piece of candy in my hand. I was controllable. I was malleable. I was constructed. And I was a child. I was Cameron. Period.

There is some part of humans that helps them to accept their positions. Some people are content to live in the position they were placed in to begin with. They accept their places like they are living in some sort of universal caste system, unable to escape the limits that society has placed on them. They live as part of the majority, losing themselves in the crowd. To escape this system, there has to be a realization that develops from within, a realization that one must not live for the majority for the betterment of the majority but must live for oneself for the betterment of the whole. "One's group identity is always a mask" (Steele, "White Guilt"). Without this realization, we will all become one; we will all be wearing the same mask.

I was in middle school. I had taken on a new understanding of myself since those days of refrigerator pictures and candy-coated rewards. Yesterday's excitement had become today's childish delights—something to be avoided if one was ever to drink the sweet nectar of the popular kids. My identity had become whatever the identity of the "in group" wanted it to be. "I am whatever you say I am" (Eminem, "The Way I Am"). I was listening to the music everyone else was listening to, playing sports with the popular kids, rebelling against the math teacher just because everyone hated math (even though, at the time, I was good at it).

-Do you like the math teacher?

-He isn't bad. I don't mind him.

-Well, I hate that guy. Math sucks.

-You're right. I don't really like him either. Math does suck.

At the time, it didn't feel like I was losing myself; I just wanted to be popular. And being that I was an overweight kid in a hostile middle school environment intensified my yearning for popularity. Life wasn't about carving out my own niche; life was about being the same, being like everyone else. I was me. My friends were me. My sports were me. My school was

me. I was so focused on everyone else's approval that everyone else became what I wanted to be. The majority never looked so unique. I wanted, as an individual, to see myself reflected in the masses, to look in the mirror while standing next to a friend and be unable to distinguish one from the other. This was my dream: to be a blank puzzle piece in the box of one thousand other blank pieces. I wanted nobody to question me on what I liked or what I wanted because I wanted what I liked and what I wanted to be the same as what everyone else liked and wanted. Hiding *my* interests and not bringing them out in public became the way to remain "safe." I was normal. I was popular. I was Cameron. And I was everyone. I was wearing the same mask as everyone else.

"Where someone rules, there are masses; and where we find masses we also find a need to be enslaved" (Nietzsche 195).

The danger of living for the majority, of relating to the majority so easily, is that we stray farther from ourselves than is healthy. We start to lose sight of who we are, and in doing so, we start to form an identity not of our own unique structure but of a structure dictated by the masses. We walk away from ourselves, no closer to knowing who we are than when we were first released into the world. The worst part of this group identification comes with being content to live with the identity that has been bestowed upon us by others. Contentment is the most dangerous feeling, and it is also the easiest to fall into. With contentment comes the inability to question, and without the ability to question we will never be able to know our *self*.

There is a time when everyone has to grow up. Isn't that what our elders always told us? Attached to that advice were other generic pieces of what, at one time, sounded like profound wisdom: You can't please everyone. Be yourself. Don't do it just because your friends are doing it (If all of your friends

jumped off of a bridge, would you?).

-You can't please everyone, Cameron.

-Wow, you are absolutely right. That is where I have been going wrong this whole time. Thanks, Insert ANY name here.

-I'm glad I could help.

-You are the best.

This is what I call, in this new technologically advanced era, "Facebook advice." But I used to think this type of advice came straight from the heart. At least, it did always make me feel better about my situation. I was becoming content with the lifestyle I was living, getting by with the advice I was given. I was slipping into the murky waters of "fineness." Everything will take care of itself. I wasn't doing any real growing up; I was only following the advice of others. I was attempting to expand myself, to understand myself without the knowledge of how to go about understanding myself. It was a premature attempt at growth that only tightened the mask on my face, forcing me deeper and deeper into the group identity, making me lose myself at a more rapid rate than ever before.

Maybe it is not until we sink to our lowest point that we can finally look up and see the stars. We have been forever spiraling down, being twisted and distorted for so long that we were never able to get a clear view of what was around us. The bottom provides some stability; it provides a painful realization that we are no longer ourselves. The mask we have been wearing for so long, the group identity that has created us and shaped our lives, is beginning to crack. Darkness seeps through the fissure, reminding us of the time when we were part of ourselves, living inside the womb, before we were exposed to the light that so rudely blinded us and turned us

away from ourselves. The bottom provides a much needed awakening. Here is where we begin to realize that something is wrong, allowing us to open our eyes and embrace the darkness that surrounds us. We don't see a thing, but we experience the comfort that the darkness provides. But only for a short time. We must reenter the light, while attempting to remember the darkness. We will be blinded at first, but the memory of the darkness will keep us pushing forward.

The early college years. I was still living with the mask of the group identity upon my face, but it was beginning to itch. There was something wrong with the way I was living. All those years of living for the group, whether it was family or friends, whether it was willingly or, to an extent, unwillingly, had to come to an end. I was lost at the bottom of my 19-year hole. It had taken me this long to realize that I had lost myself somewhere along the way. But a change was coming, a change I could feel within myself. Before I realized this problem inside of me, I was drinking all of the time, getting high before classes, ditching school to party, but it stopped feeling right.

I began to recognize all the negative parts of myself, parts that I didn't even realize were negative until this self-reflection. I realized that I had not been living *for* me; I had been living *as* those around me lived. I was a part of something on the outside, something bigger; it dictated the choices I made, the people I hung out with, the movements of my thoughts. I was calling myself into question, using one side of my brain to interrogate the other.

-What is your problem? Why have you made these choices?

-You are part of me. You should know the answer.

-Why are I here, you?

-You know us to be parts of one both.

The language got scrambled. Two sides of a whole pitted against one another. The throbbing increased in my head. No coherent answer presented itself as to why or how I wanted to make a change. The negatives all got mixed into one until that final eruption, the volcano of my mind, the sudden burst of molten light that rose high into the air and then coated the world with the dark layer of ash, coated *my world*. I could breathe again in the darkness. The ash filled my lungs, and I could breathe out dust, a yet-to-be-formed idea that needed time to solidify. It was only a question.

I just wanted to fit in? The statement had morphed, had altered its appearance and turned into a question. Did I want to fit in? Did I want to be part of something, part of the group identity? No, not any longer. I wanted to be part of myself. I wanted to realize my full potential without realizing what my full potential was. I wanted to take a step in a direction that would set me apart from the group. I was awake inside my own head, making changes for myself that I would never have dreamed about in the past. I changed my major, stopped partying so much, distanced myself from the majority. This is when the dull throbbing began; this is when it got painful and scary. I had finally broken away from the group identity, but I still didn't have an identity of my own. I was finding my *self*; yes, but I was nowhere near complete. My mask had become blank, but I was still wearing a mask.

Knowing that there is a piece missing on the inside is only the beginning of understanding who we are. The mask that we wore for so long, the mask of the group identity does not just fall off when we realize we are not truly our own *self*. The mask might remain in place forever, changing shape as our experiences grow with our own personal interests and understandings. Will it ever go away?

Maybe it is a futile endeavor, this trying to know thyself. If it takes a lifetime to accomplish with no actual guarantee of accomplishment, then what is the point? I can just as easily live happily wearing any mask. After all, are humans not social beings, designed to mingle and reproduce and prosper—together? I want my friends. I want my family. I want my girlfriend and my classmates and my professors. I live in happy ignorance of myself when I feel it is necessary to do so. I become part of the group, part of the student body that makes up the twelve-thousand or so people who attend the University of Northern Colorado. I claim to want to know myself while at the same time claiming to be part of a bigger group of people. My dreams revolve around ideas of doing something great, something to change something else (Ahh, the hopes of the mind and the dreams of the youth). But, even if I were to realize my dreams, to become someone “unique,” someone who changed the world, wouldn’t I still be lumped into a group? There seems to be no escape, no possible way to shed the mask of the group identity without being forced to sport a new mask of a new group with a new label. It is a circle, perhaps.

Are we forever rotating? Do we join a group at one stage in our life, break from that group to discover our *self*, and then reposition ourselves within a different group until that group begins to lack what we need to progress? This seems to be the case. Without complete isolation from any group influence whatsoever, the idea of actually *knowing thyself* seems to be only a dream. With so much outside influence and so many ideas already floating around in the ocean that is the mind (and not just our own minds but the minds of other individuals, because, yes, we all share similar thoughts no matter whether or not we have met), is it even possible, with such a large number of people inhabiting the earth, to call oneself unique? Is it even possible that we can have a self of our own?

“Laws are necessary, of course, for no single individual, however good and co-operative, can have precise knowledge of the total needs of the community. Laws point the way to an emergent pattern of social perfection—they are guides. But, because of the fundamental thesis that the citizen’s desire is to behave like a good social animal, not like a selfish beast of the waste wood, it is assumed that the laws will be obeyed” (Burgess 18).

Anthony Burgess may have been right. What happens if we use his fictional representation of the future as a model for the present, as a model for our mind. The laws would become our own thoughts, uncontrollable and all powerful, holding us back from breaking the rules of the majority because our thoughts know what is best for us. Our thoughts become our guides on the way to becoming perfect as a whole, a group of people sharing an identity. Is this the perfection we have been seeking out? Are we really programmed from the start “to behave like a good social animal”? After all, don’t we sometimes want to blend with the crowd, go unnoticed in a cloud of faces, unrecognized and undisturbed. Do we not prize functioning members of society—members who contribute to the greater good of the community—over all others? These if-he-helps-me-I-will-help-him scenarios seem to be the standard operating procedure of society. Who would want to be known as “a selfish beast”?

I want to remove it, but it has ceased to be just a superficial covering over my face. I want to feel the flesh underneath, but the substance underneath is no longer what one would call or could call “flesh.” I want to scratch the itch of understanding that is building under my mask, but there is no seam, no strap to simply remove, no button to push for automatic removal. It feels like a horror movie, this inability to remove the covering from my face. I struggle to find some sort of opening and am left with broken fingernails and blood on my hands. But the blood is not from my hands; it is from the mask. I look in the mirror and see the “face,” unrecognizable and battered

to a pulp. I crave that darkness that I used to know; I close my eyes. For too long has the mask been upon my face. Like a neglected house pet with a too-tight collar the mask has grown into my “flesh.” It has ceased to be a real mask, ceased to be a mere covering up of who I really am; it has become part of me, part of my make-up, part of my everything. When I smile, I can feel the mask move with my facial muscles. When I touch my forehead, I can feel my fingers caressing what has now become part of me. I am a stranger to myself, but I am also new, somewhat reborn. I close my eyes even tighter. This is the darkness that I once knew. The darkness I understood before I knew I was able to understand. The mask has ceased to itch. Me, I have ceased to itch. This is my face. Maybe I have accepted my place. Maybe I have accepted that the mask that I so longed to remove was never really able to be removed. After all, what would I even look like without it? How would I be complete without it, after being through so much with it as my companion? This is how I understand myself, isn't it?

I'm in a classroom with some of my classmates for the first time ever. I know not a single person in the room.

-Class, what do you think when you see this picture?

-Praying mantis! (two students at once)

Two students, neither knowing anything about the other, say the same thing. Both have had different experiences in their lives, but they say the exact same thing. Although this example is very simple, it helps to explain why, perhaps, we cannot ever be our own *self*. Especially today, with all of the sharing of thoughts and ideas, the free social media sites where people can post thoughts (fully developed or otherwise), and the exchange of emails and the watching of television programs. Are any of our thoughts our own? It seems that we are just compiled of various words and phrases that have been said throughout time, repeated over and over in different generations by different people. Myself: I am built from the words of

my parents, influenced by the thoughts of my friends, directed by the instruction of my teachers, but I am living in a body of my own. Who am I, man? I guess this is when it gets tricky.

Even now—sitting in my room by myself, surrounded by the air around me, writing my thoughts down in what I hope to be a coherent paper—am I only a part of myself? Is this alone time bringing me closer to realizing who I am? After all, this topic is of my choosing; my fingers are doing the typing; my brain is forming all of the sentences on the page. Right? But then I think about it. These thoughts in my head are not completely my own; these words I am writing have come before me; these ideas that I am incorporating in my paper have been altered by the feedback of my peers, by all of you who are reading this paper. All of you have contributed to this document in one way or another, have placed your thoughts within my head, have given me the comments and compliments that have altered my thinking. The question of “Who am I?” has become even more obscure. The more I try to develop my reasoning and sort out my thoughts, the more I find myself looking inside books to find quotes from people who think similarly or who have something smart to say that will help clarify what I am trying to explain. Is this what knowing thyself is? Can I only know myself through others’ ideas and others’ learning?

“There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better or for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till” (Emerson 533).

Maybe this is the answer or, if not an answer, a beginning. Maybe *my* life story (my experiences, my friends, my good

and bad decisions, my family) makes me *me*. Maybe knowing myself, knowing *thyself* is working with what has been given to me. Maybe the moving from group identity to group identity and wearing the masks of different groups at different times is what helped to produce the land on which I will begin to cultivate. After all, one cannot build one's experiences in a vacuum. I was *given* the land to till by others, and the others, to an extent, have a say in what I plant. After all, if the land is located in a mental environment that is cold, there will be no planting of bananas. I can only control how much I plant, can only choose from a limited variety of produce, but I at least have that control, and I guess that is all I can really ask for?

Who am I, man? I don't know yet. I know where I have been. I know what I like and dislike. I know the Denver Broncos are my favorite football team, and I love to read. I know that my family and friends have had such a huge impact on my life that I am thankful to have them as *part* of me, but not me. My *self*: that is where it gets tricky. I don't fully know. I think I am still like Emerson's farmer, planting and growing and harvesting and replanting. Maybe one year a crop will not grow, a harvest will not be completed, or a field will be neglected, but I will keep coming back. I will experiment with new crops, use new equipment to provide nutrients for my land, for my mind, for all of those who have helped to begin the process.

We define ourselves in different ways, never really finishing until we are dead, and even then—if we leave something or someone behind—we are still being defined in the minds of others. It's not so bad to not know who we are, because if we knew that we might not be willing to step out of our comfort zones. If we know our *self* too well, there is no room to change, and in an ever-changing world, that is suicide.

But today is when it comes full circle.
The Night collides with the Day;
a Serpent eating its tail begs for more
Inside the brain of an empty skull
bleached by Sun and darkened by
pain and terror. A gaze
from the sand-filled sockets creates
a shadowy vision of what is to come.
The Hidden Enemy waits behind, splitting its soul in two.
The mirror gazes back and looks inside itself.
The image smiling back is of itself.
But something more,
something better, and
something worse.
It has seen the other side of One.
The One whose other side is Nothing.
But today is when it comes full circle.
The Night collides with the Day;
Nothing makes sense.
But now it is all clear.

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I love Cameron's essay because it's doing so much imitative work, yet he's made it his own through the intense practices of meditation found in self writing. He begins with a question (which is a strategy I encourage in self writing assignments in order to help students into meditative practices). For Cameron, the question is, essentially, "who am I," but the question evolves in complex and compelling ways so that the essay is less about who he is and more about how [his] self is made. To explore this question, he structures the essay, at least on the surface, chronologically—starting with birth and moving through a few major life stages. However, upon further examination, it's clear to me that he is actually imitating Richard Miller's strategic use of fragmented text (in *Writing at the End of the World*)—positioning the fragments of text in such a way that the connections between sections (or the gaps) are opportunities for meaning-making, as much as (if not more than) a traditional transition might be.

For example, in the section that begins, "I was in middle school," Cameron uses at least two structures he's used in prior fragments: the dialogue between himself and a fictional other, as well as a particular syntactical sentence structure to designate a blurred subject-object relation (e.g., "My sports were me. My school was me"). Both structures call up, in this section, their uses in prior sections (e.g., in an earlier section, he said, "I was football. I was candy"). In that calling-up, the fragments of text are brought into explicit relation with one another—made to speak to each other, suggesting the development (through repetition and relation) of a particular idea among them.

For me, though, what is most interesting here is not necessarily the relation established between each fragment/section of text, but Cameron's use of a kind of mirroring sentence structure. That structure ("I am it. It is me.") is not one we discussed, as a class, when we talked about Miller's work. It is, to my mind, Cameron's attempt at taking the relation he's working to create among these fragments of text to another level—to the sentence level. In that syntactic relationship, he suggests the conceptual relationship that he will talk about explicitly later in the essay: the idea that his identity is structured according to "the masses" (including the masses' language, ways of making meaning, and ways of identifying the self). Cameron arrives at this realization, through the use of strategic pairing of fragments of text, like Miller does, but also through his use of the mirroring of sentence-structures. In short, he's imitated Miller's use of frag-

mented texts, but also intensified the imitation, making a new kind of pairing at the sentence level in his essay.

In addition to the ways in which Cameron has imitated and transformed Miller's particular use of strategic pairings, Cameron has, of course, essayed new content. In part, the content is "new" because of the structures. For example, looking at the same section (that begins with "I was in middle school"), Cameron arrives at this insight: "I was Cameron. And I was everyone. I was wearing the same mask as everyone else." Then, the section ends, and a new section begins with a quote from Nietzsche: "Where someone rules, there are masses; and where we find masses we also find a need to be enslaved." The positioning of the prior section against the quote raises the stakes and deepens the exploration. According to Cameron, the desire for safety, which motivates one to conform to the masses (to identify with things and experiences and groups that are part of "the masses"), is related to the need to be enslaved. That relation is a terrible realization for him—he realizes in it that the relation between safety and enslavement costs him his self, or knowledge of his self.

"New" content is also made, though, in Cameron's engagement with the ideas presented by the scholars he's read—in particular, Nietzsche. That engagement enables several other crises (realizations that are utterly disruptive) in the essay. The two that seem most disruptive are these: the moment in which Cameron realizes that humans might be "forever rotating" from self-discovery to self-erasure with a group, as well as the moment that his exploration becomes mired in the tension between wanting "to behave like a good social animal," not wanting to be known as "a selfish beast" (both are quotes Cameron pulls from Nietzsche's work), yet wanting desperately to get free of the confines, the impositions of groups, of language, and of "the mask." Here, I believe that his investigation into how the self is made comes to a head. He's been clinging onto the hope, the ideal, of a totally autonomous and essential self—one born fully whole and utterly perfect. At this moment, though, he considers, at last, another possibility—a possibility suggested in Nietzsche's work.

In the end, after at least a couple of pages of one crisis after another, Cameron practices "affirmation." In its simplest terms, affirmation is the practice of accepting some truth (however situational and tentative) for the purpose of testing it out or "taking it seriously," which I explain to my students as meaning that they must play that truth out—testing it out in a variety of contexts and finding out what it costs them and what it gets them in each. For Cameron, this affirmative practice happens around the "truth" that "Maybe knowing myself, knowing *thymself*, is working with what has been given to me" (emphasis in original). Clearly, that is exactly what he's done in this essay. And, it is exactly the kind of affirmative practice that functions as the engine to Nietzsche's work:

he makes claims as bold and daring as “God is dead” through the affirmative practice—by taking seriously the various and related truths that others (e.g., philosophers) have refused for centuries.

Cameron’s essay is ambitious work, and like Seneca says, the essay “resemble[s] [that which ‘has left a deep impress upon you’] as a child resembles his father, and not as a picture resembles its original” (281). In the end, I can see the traces of Nietzsche’s work and Plato’s and Miller’s, but this is an entirely new essay. And, in it is revealed a different self.

Finally, I include below a sample essay produced in response to what I like to call my “capstone” essay assignment. In it, students are encouraged to start where they are. If they’ve had some experience with meditative or self writing practices in prior essays, then I push them to move beyond deliberately mimicking the strategies used by other writers and to concentrate, instead, on the major practices of self writing: practicing the disparate (including the truth test) and unification. In other words, I use imitation as a way into this larger practice of meditation or self writing; then, once they are familiar with that larger practice, I ask them to concentrate on the particular practices that constitute self writing. Often, I send them to Foucault’s “Self Writing” so that they can see what those particular practices are and how they constitute the larger practice of self writing. I warn/advise them that the writing should feel like “getting into the ring” with a difficult, high-stakes topic.

I negotiate much of this “pushing” in one-on-one conferences with the student. Not all are ready for this step in an advanced personal essay course. I include here a sample essay produced by a student (one of two out of a course of 15 students) who was, obviously, ready for that step. Here’s her essay:

Holly Stimson
5740 words

“The intuitive man [...] aims for the greatest possible freedom from pain [...] and] reaps from his intuition a harvest of continually inflowing illumination, cheer, and redemption—in addition to obtaining a defense against misfortune. To be sure, he suffers more intensely, when he suffers; he even suffers more frequently, since he does not understand how to learn from experience and keeps falling over and over again into the same ditch. He is then just as irrational in sorrow as he is in happiness [...] and will not be consoled.”

“How differently [the rational man] who learns from experience

and governs himself by concepts is affected by the same misfortunes! This man [...] seeks nothing but sincerity, truth, freedom from deception, and protection against ensnaring surprise attacks... he executes his masterpiece of deception in misfortune."

—Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense"

Creativity: The Rational Man Bled Dry

I typed "Creativity" in the title line and began to think about the act of creating, particularly. And the moment I did, I found I couldn't write any more.

Strange that this word, "creativity," would be the death (or at least temporary paralyzation) of my creative thought. After all, creativity is the capacity to form something, to produce some artifact or do some action from the imagination, to invent. Whether that creativity comes from the soul, the heart, the body, the brain, I don't know definitively. But I've always operated under the notion that creativity is dependent upon the brain, perhaps not solely, but in many ways. It is the channel through which external inspiration is run, and it is the brain that processes internal musings as well as governs the most basic building blocks that make creative products possible: the moving of a paintbrush, the solving of a calculus equation, the uttering of language.

This basic premise made me wonder if my personal failure to create was due to some sort of mind starvation. Ever since leaving the world of high school and entering college, I've fed my intellect with reviewing and learning of the greats in my first chosen field of study: philosophy. I studied Kant and his categorical imperative, hoping that whether in his correctness or incorrectness I could find some system of morality for myself and the world; I immersed myself in the Greek greats, Plato and Aristotle, pouring over the allegory of the cave as I sought the sun myself, and admiring the rhetoric of that great rhetorician who provided me with a vehicle for effectively expressing and persuading; I considered the social construction

of Nietzsche in an attempt to construct myself, and I wonder what it means for God to be dead; I examine power in flux and wonder at what power I have at any given moment as I read Foucault. I devoured logical sequences of premises leading to irrefutable, mathematical results, syllogisms in which statements that could only be either true or false and which lead to conclusions that were sound or unsound.

For a time, this black and white world was tremendously satisfying. It was a realm in which I could look, examine, and exclaim, “right!” or “wrong!” and have the opportunity to be flawless and correct. Then the waves of ethics and epistemology came crashing down on my philosophical bubble, and the endless possibilities, the endless hours spend in a maze of inquiry, eventually became exhausting. I discovered that really determining which statements were actually true or false was more difficult than theoretically declaring things true or false within an inconsequential hypothetical syllogism, and I began to yearn to land somewhere rather than voyaging on the unending philosophical sea made by those who came before me. Philosophy helped me see part of the map, but it left something to be desired—some human element, a connection that theories couldn’t achieve. I wanted an island of my own on which to rest, not the island of name-the-philosopher-by-whose-ideas-you-live-your-life.

So, I set sail. I declared English as my major and moved on to literature, a place where I was certain I could spend the majority of my time reading stories of interest, stories I liked, and that would in turn fuel my creativity and cause a flare of inspiration for stories of my own. But I discovered that to truly be taken seriously in literature, I had to learn how to cleverly combine a number of ideas that existed for decades and centuries. I had to spend a good deal of time indulging the ideas of my professor and, seemingly, my peers, rather than actually caring about every weapon being a phallic symbol and colors always representing the same things depending on the context. I had landed on my island, yes, but I was running on shifting sand. *Beowulf* made an impact the first time. I was

delighted to partake in a seminal epic; I wanted to understand the literary greats before me; I was determined to invest time in understanding the literary discourses of which I was now a part. And after all this, when I was assigned *Beowulf* again, I was pleasantly surprised to gain new insights in the second reading. By the third time I was assigned it, I began to feel lazy when I skipped reading it. I learned a hundred different ways to look at a hundred different texts from a hundred different people, and instead of opening my mind to possibilities, I began to feel off-balance, as if I were carrying too many stories and potential interpretations, and if I didn't drop some of them, I would take a tumble myself. Juggling these things had left little room for me to even hazard a guess about my own opinions regarding these stories, much less left room to create stories myself.

I left my island (probably after reading somewhere that “no man is an island”) and returned to more philosophical undertakings, but this time of a different nature: I sailed oceans of religion. Perhaps I'd grown tired of categorizing myself by differences and wanted to instead categorize myself by similarities and a shared community; but regardless of that, I wanted to find myself, my story, my beliefs, which would, in turn, spark my creativity for a lifetime, surely. But no, religion wasn't that place. This leg of my journey was less sailing and more a tossing about of a toy ship on hurricane seas. For it was wonderful, intellectual, *rational* to be well schooled in the principle tenants of the eastern religions, in Daoism and Hinduism and Buddhism and all sorts of -isms. Being well-versed in Biblical themes lent itself well to my increasingly frustrated literary escapades. Concepts about Judaism and Islam were terrifically helpful to the academic image, for what appears smarter than understanding and tolerating on an intellectual level those who are often subjected to prejudices under those less wise and educated? But all this head knowledge—again, my brain—was not enough. There was something that could not be accessed. For I was allowed to describe five religions and even comment on their irrationalities or benefits while still being considered an academic, but admitting the one to which I adhered decreased my ethos, ruined my unbiased

perspectives. Admitting a moral conviction was tolerable, if sometimes awkward, in classroom discussions, but papers cannot and should not be written about a feeling or conviction because in academia, faith cannot be rationalized and made into something arguable and researchable.

By this time, I finally, perhaps belatedly, wondered if I was over-stimulating my intellect while neglecting another part of myself, so I began to drink in poetry—Yeats, Dickinson, Seely, Levine. And once more my intellect at work: brilliantly over-emphasize and overlook. I was captured by forms and I forced rhyme and I spent hours thinking about what way I wanted to write a poem rather than picking up a pencil. I posted a thousand conflicting quotes from the greats on how to write poetry, and I never acted on one of them. I memorized half a dozen stanzas and forgot them after recitation. And most of all, I could not find a place from which to write, the source to fuel poetry, and I felt less a poet than ever before because for others this part seemed to be what came so naturally. I couldn't access the wellspring of feeling after spending so much time learning to block the flow, and poetry, too, escaped me.

And all the while, my mind never stopped. Though I began with a love for creativity and the written word, I became merely a bank of others' academic thought. Words fell flat; creativity felt like a myth. For though I speak of creativity in the broadest terms, creativity also, in essence, revolves around the faculties of language: reading, writing, and other such linguistic discourses. I don't hold that language is the height of creative achievement; rather, it is simply the capacity in which I and every human creates, it is the common medium for everyone, and it is more dear to me than other forms of creativity because I cannot remove it from what it means to be human. Take away the artist's palette, and she will find some other vehicle for her art, but take away language, and I cannot speak into the void; I cannot communicate; identity and humanity come crashing down.

* * * * *

To be at a loss for words meant I was stuck. I looked, but I didn't find. "This man, who at other times seeks nothing but sincerity, truth, freedom from deception, and protection against ensnaring surprise attacks [...]."

Class periods passed, pages of lecture notes were filled, I and dozens of my peers received shiny "A+" marks for contributing meaningful comments on texts I'd half-read, and still my brain felt like a wasteland. The engaging philosophical discussions that had once captured my whole head and heart, the hours full of poetry readings and writings that had dazzled my love of language and rhythm, the stories that had once filled me with promise and possibility like a balloon filled with helium—gone. I could recognize a fallacy in a logical syllogism, but I could not creatively think about these texts and make connections or come to conclusions; I could rattle off a dozen scholars I'd read on the vernacular tradition, but I could not create and verbalize sentences representing my own thoughts on my peer's argument; I could explain a villanelle and a Rogerian argument, but I could not create an original poem or an original thesis by which I could stand and say, "This is mine." Creativity and its college pseudo-disguise, critical thinking, were lost to me. And I couldn't remember why.

It was as if I was only becoming conscious after some sort of physical trauma to my head. I couldn't remember what exactly went wrong. After a long and delightful day of school that loaded my head with wonderful things, I sat down to begin an essay, and I entitled it "Creativity Part 2" because it was a continuation of a previous exploration on creativity.

And that's the last thing I remember. Maybe there was more in the process of losing creativity, maybe the moment leading up to the loss is all I chose to remember rather than trauma of the moment of loss, but I remember no more. "[This man] now executes his masterpiece of deception [...]."

* * * * *

If this is beginning to sound as though I have disavowed all

my intellectual predecessors in order to pretend I don't stand on the shoulders of those who come before me, that isn't true. I haven't the will or belief to front such a foolish and fallacious claim. I revere the greats of my academic disciplines, even if I don't believe or adhere to every claim made by them. No, the problem is not with my intellectual predecessors.

In fact, I don't know what the problem is. I simply woke up one day and realized that every paragraph I write mimics whatever I read before it. The lengthy, poetic, convoluted syntax of Emerson; the strange technicalities of Cummings; or the rigid, measured tones of scholarship—I was no longer my own. And what concerned me wasn't mimicry (which is, I've read, the highest form of flattery, is it not?). When I had to reach, research, cross-reference, and double-check myself against a college career of accumulated knowledge before writing a simple sentence regarding Plato, I felt dried up even in the middle of the floodgates of information at my beck and call. And that's when I realized I didn't even know why I bothered to write when the world was already flooded with a thousand discourses with or without me. I didn't even know who I was, aside from college student, sponge.

Why do I seem to have hit my creative end? I hope it is only temporary, but even so, why has it occurred? I've experienced the proverbial "writer's block," and this is not it. I still have the capacity for creativity in language, for even now I pen a sentence that has (probably) never been written, thus demonstrating that creativity. What, then, is the problem? Have I some defect that should take me off the production line of scholars? Was I never supposed to question creativity—or even myself—because I was meant to be learning all the possible answers?

"He executes his masterpiece of deception in misfortune, as the other type of man executes his in times of happiness."

Have I somehow lost myself in the midst of so many other ideas? Ah, but this would assume that I have some essential self to lose. That I am the sum of my feelings, intuitions,

instincts, and that I am quite possibly destined to something because I am me. I would say that's not how I *feel*, but that would only further the case for this essential self, a self that is based on feelings. I would say that my internal crisis seems based more on the fact that, without creative thought, I have become merely an intersection, a passing of discourses, a product of everything swirling around and through me. But even then, I can't settle upon that notion, regardless of my feelings, because my eyes ache with too many words written and my head throbs with the stress of my dilemma and my body is still intact.

I question why, and though I may not show or admit it, I'm secretly afraid. "He wears no quivering and changeable human face, but, as it were, a mask with dignified, symmetrical features."

What is it that causes this desert state when, judging by my blossoming peers and by the commendation for the university experience, I should in fact be an oasis of intellectual ideas, critical thinking, and creativity? It isn't as though I have been robbed of all opinions by the overwhelmingly "better" opinions of others, for time and again I have shouldered a heavy and solid thesis and built an ironclad argument to support it. It isn't as though others' opinions have drowned mine out, leaving me incapable of generating opinions or expressing them, for I've started a dozen papers just today, each with different topics, quotes, and ideas. Yet, not one of them has grown to fruition; few made it past the first paragraph or two before hitting an invisible wall of which I cannot derive the origination.

* * * * *

How could this invisible wall exist in a world of constant learning? How could my creativity run dry when I drink constantly of the streams of the greatest creative minds on the planet? I cannot explain why, of course, because I have no creativity with which to generate such an answer. I could write the wonder whys, but the capacity to put more than one

and one together eludes me, and that alarms me.

“He does not cry; he does not even alter his voice.”

So, the ringing bell, the realization that I cannot realize because the realization has already passed. The intuitive man is dead. In its place, the rational man: “When a real storm cloud thunders above him, he wraps himself in his cloak, and with slow steps he walks from beneath it” (Nietzsche 1179).

The ultimate pay-off: that misfortune, the death of my own creativity, should turn out to be merely a bothersome storm cloud from which I can easily, calmly, rationally escape. Perhaps, if I rationalize further, this creativity is not even dead at all, but is rather a new incarnation of creativity that, instead of existing only with the intention “to express an exalted happiness,” instead of “reap[ing] from [my] intuition a harvest of continually inflowing illumination, cheer and redemption,” I have learned to steadily, rationally remove myself from misfortunes. Perhaps there is creativity in that, too. Surely it is the ultimate creative thought to remove oneself from the storm while others are too busy reaping sunshine to notice the dark growth overhead—that cloud of what I’ve learned, my superstitions, falseness, failure, and even the successes masquerading as something more ominous, the cloud that no one who lives, escapes.

Yet, what is the deception here? Nietzsche tells us there is one, that the rational man “executes his masterpiece of deception in misfortune.” What then is the deception? The unchangeable human face—the stoic? The slowness of his steps—logic? The very idea that you can walk from beneath the cloud (philosophy)—or even walk at all (religion)? Misfortune itself?

Wherever the deception lies, the fact that the rational man deceives and makes art, a masterpiece, of his deception proves that the rational man can know the truth he seeks, but he can choose to shroud it, to operate on opposite terms, to bring others in on his deliberate preference for the denial of truth.

If this is so, and if the head of Nietzsche's rational man is what's rearing inside of me, a writer I cannot be, for, as I'm constantly told, "A good poet [writer, creator] is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times; a dozen or two dozen times and he is great" (Randall Jarrell). The rational man removes himself from such a storm and would thus avoid this brand of greatness, yet what human creates in order to not achieve some sort of greatness? And if the storm itself is a deception, then what strikes the writer but lies? And if, as Plato says, "poetry is nearer to vital truth than history," how could the rational man, usually "seek[ing] nothing but [...] truth" yet creating "masterpiece[s] of deception" ignore the creative force of poetry, or of writing?

That would, then, make creativity the great deception rather than misfortune. It would make the writer the most conflicted of all creatures—truth seeker, truth bearer; professional liar, deception weaver. Perhaps the rational man and the intuitive man are two extremes. Or perhaps they are the Nietzschean equivalent to the id and the ego, being, rather than two separate men, two forces constantly at play in one man. Truthful and deceptive, both, but in opposite arenas. Perhaps from this flux, from this constant conflict, from the overlap, is where creativity is born and truth is found. For, as Yeats, a product of Nietzsche's influence, wrote, "out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry"; out of this internal conflict springs forth products of creativity, products of vital truth. And that is what the writer seeks—or, at least, feigns to seek.

Yet, in the ebb and flow, one of these two people, intuitive man and rational man, must at times override, and if I'm to be a scholar, surely it must be the rational man to prevail. That was what Nietzsche was arguing, was it not? In the favor of the rational man and against the silly whims to which the intuitive man was a slave?

And this is when I realized two things: first, that I am the rational man. And second, that the great deception of which Nietzsche writes is the rational man. Which means I am the

deception.

I reviewed my intellectual pursuits in light of this. Philosophy, that grand deception of wisdom, wherein I could examine a hundred possible truths without ever actually claiming a single truth because everything can be hedged behind the phrase, “to play devil’s advocate [...]” Perhaps if I had listened, I would have noted a whisper of desire to feel passionate about one of these truths, but such a thing would have been irrational. Literature, that grand deception of the speculative, wherein I could explicate any sentence of any story and fabricate some meaning out of it worthy of an A- research paper. Perhaps if I had not spent so much time concerned with duality (is that experience positive or negative? Is that decision right or wrong? Is my thesis correct or incorrect?), I would have realized that I had made fiction of myself rather than ever recognize or tell my story. Religion, that grand deception of faith, wherein I could prosthetize convincingly or mark myself the greatest skeptic for a day or two if only I was well-versed enough in certain tenants. Perhaps if I’d noticed the hunger gnawing in myself for something to believe in, I wouldn’t have been trapped by a devil for so long. Poetry, that grand deception of beauty, wherein I could lay in beds of sensual imagery and pleasant-sounding rhythm while I waited to hear indicators of form. Perhaps if I had paused, I would have seen flashing by the beauty of the real world ‘round me as I rushed to classes on Transcendentalism.

Because for years, I studied the philosophy of the rational man, sacrificed at the altar of the rational man, molded my life into a story driven by the main character, Rational Man, thought of the rational man as the most beautiful and desirable person on the planet. I struggled to humanize essays and arguments, to make them personal. I was too cold, people said. My works, though “well-written” and “thoughtful” had no feeling. They could not echo. And for years, I tried to mask this rational man in me with the face of the intuitive man in order to be more accessible. But I don’t think many believed my deception; and when I look in the mirror, I see

that the rational man was a deception in himself, a mask I'd put on the moment I stepped foot in the college classroom and began to understand what the true cost of a diploma was.

Creativity restored. Intuitive man reigns happily ever after. My essential self regained and purified. That's where my story should end, sentimentally?

But the Tin Man didn't get a heart the moment he realized he was without one. Emotion could not return to me simply because the veil was lifted. I needed to understand when the rational man had become my idol in order to understand where I had abandoned all feeling, the capacity to trip over and over again as I harvested the "illumination, cheer, and redemption" to all the glorious irrationalities that come with barricading myself against misfortune.

I thought this part, finding a moment in time, would be exceedingly difficult. It wasn't. I remember that single day on a calendar easily. I don't know if it was the first time the rational man was paraded before me, but it was certainly when the intuitive man was frightened right out of me. My first creative writing class, my fourth or fifth time to workshop my own writing with my peers. I wrote a personal memoir chronicling my experience of losing a close friend to suicide. The grief, the numbness, the anger, the funeral, the burial, the months after. Scene after scene of imagery, thought, and feeling. The actual events had occurred over a year before the workshop, and though I knew the process of revision could be difficult for me given the topic, I felt prepared for that. Enough time had elapsed. The topic was a good one; I wrote from a place of the heart, and yet I structured it well. Tightly knit. Cohesive. Grammatically impeccable. Not perfect, not at all, but I knew it was good enough to avoid steep criticism and encourage insightful, constructive criticism.

The overwhelming response from both my classmates and peers reinforced these things that I already knew. But on all counts, they decried the memoir as lacking something, as failing in some way. It was illogical, they said. They couldn't

understand *why* my friend killed himself, they said. It was irrational. The whole essay was nonsensical without understanding the *reasons*.

I told them I didn't know, and that's why I wrote. Death didn't make sense. That's why I wrote. To try to make sense of things that didn't have reasons.

They could only reiterate that the essay didn't work without explaining my friend's reasons for killing himself. As if I knew. As if I could write my life like fiction and understand the reasons behind things that had no reason.

I received a low grade on the memoir, I received looks of pity from the other writers whose works had been published in the school literary magazine, and I hated the intuitive man. I hated feeling. Nothing good came from it but fear and bad grades and bad writing and the desire to melt into the floor.

Enter the rational man.

Enter those years of academic, rational exploration—fruitless pursuits. The belief that the rational man trumped the intuitive man on every count.

But if the intuitive man was frightened out of me, what then was the rational man but a mask for fear? I, a mimicry of the rational man, was a deception unto myself, masked, ignorant of my own fear because I imagined that I found myself above it. At least the intuitive man feels the fear of the fall each time he trips into the same ditch. At least he is consistent, “as irrational in sorrow as he is in happiness” (1179). At least “he suffers more intensely [... and] even [...] more frequently,” since he avoids deception—the requirement that reasons must exist—enough to suffer at all.

Yet, who, in all this searching, would want to settle for merely “at least?” Not everyone can “[count] as real only that life which has been disguised as illusion and beauty” (1179).

In short, who could be satisfied with the intuitive man *or* the

rational man? Both deceivers and deceived, both living in fear (whether recognized or suppressed), forced to choose between reason and intuition. The dichotomy is so commonplace that no one bats an eye at it: are you right brained or left brained? Do you like social sciences or natural sciences? Are you a solitary learner or a social learner? There are only two choices, two men to be. And I no longer want to live in light of two. I am unsatisfied. For Nietzsche sought what I seek: freedom. And both men—rational and intuitive—are slaves, forever bound to fear as long as they masquerade and march in parades of arrogance and deception or forgetful suffering and bliss.

To be sure, I am aware that I cannot live in the absence of fear. I am aware of my body, and my muscles, no matter my mental and emotional tenacity. My reflexes jerk me away from the stove top when my fingers graze the surface—and on a basic, biological level, that simultaneous fear and desire for survival fuel that response. My mind may will to survive for power, for art, for God—any number of things. But my body pursues existence, and the fibers of my being quite literally fear—not emotionally, but biologically—the end.

And again, both Nietzsche and I are left with the deepest of conundrums. Living in fear is inevitable, and only acceptance of it brings some measure of freedom. I am pursuing the impossible, the paradox. Should I not just give up? Resign myself to yesteryear's rational man syndrome? Try something new and spend my days falling in the same ditch like the rational man?

Maybe the conundrum is not in the options given, but in the questions themselves. Sven Birkerts, in an essay on Nietzsche's distant counterpart, Emerson, writes, "that the world *seems always waiting* seems incontestable, the feeling of waiting is everywhere—it is, I think, what makes us ever more deeply enslaved to our devices [...]. We are waiting for something that will feel like a solution when it arrives; we are waiting for the oppression of 'what's next?' to be lifted" (73). This is the crux of Nietzsche's point in writing the tale of the intuitive

man and the rational man. It is not merely the rational and intuitive men who are enslaved. Those who wait to solve the puzzle of which man is best, those who wait for an answer, are the enslaved. We ask the wrong questions, and wait for the answers, the “solutions,” that not only seem like solutions but *feel* like solutions. And the answers can never come, and so we are always oppressed by the unanswerable “what’s next?”

But questions are necessary, are they not? How can we avoid questions? They are in our every day, in the pause after a statement as we wait for a response, in the moment before the pitcher slides from the counter and shatters, in the way a song doesn’t resolve, when a poem resounds in our eardrums and we don’t even know what words were spoken, only that they moved. That’s all poetry, too, but doesn’t it all come down to the word? I write to understand, but I must always begin with the question. For me, here, the question I first penned, “what is creativity and where has mine gone?” (though maybe in not so many words), has not been solved but transcended. I don’t demand the dissolution of queries; I wish to escape the stagnant ones.

Questions, then, are a given. For the writer, and especially for the essayist, questions are a must; as William Gass points out, “the essay induces skepticism [...]. [It] is simply a watchful form.” Perhaps this is my enslavement, then: to duality. To the question begged and rigged. Are you a poet or a prose writer? Is Beowulf the monster or the hero? Do you adhere to the idea of the essential self or the socially constructed self? Are you the rational man or the intuitive man?

Was not this arrogance, categorization, the thing about which Nietzsche was writing about in “On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense?” After all, he states, “I make up the definition of a mammal, and then, after inspecting a camel, declare ‘look, a mammal!’” (1175). So, I, too, examine Nietzsche’s definition of the rational man, inspect myself, and declare, “look, a rational man!” But in doing this, I come closer not to truth, but to arrogance, an existence in which I have only succeeded in “designat[ing] the relations of things to men”—the fruitless

parceling of truth and lies that leads to no “adequate expression of all realities” (1173).

Have I no access to the truth through language, then? If that be the case, why did Nietzsche and his intellectual descendants write? We may not understand the tree, but do we even understand ourselves? Or is this not what writing sets out to do? As Gass points out, “now the philosopher, the theologian, takes over from the poet like the Hyde in Jekyll, and wearily works his world out...” (21). We do this work in writing, futile as our metaphors may be. But again, in writing, we seek to divide, to “describe the mechanisms of its perception, its hierarchies of value, the limits of our knowing and unknowing within that image, since he is [we are] at once the owner and surveyor and policeman of the dream” (21). Through what Nietzsche deems the greatest arrogance, language and adherence to the infallibility of our own knowledge, we self-perpetuate the cycle. I write a paper to support one of two possibilities, and a web of metaphors supports my thesis; everything is either argument or counterargument, truth or lie.

And I don't even like gray area. I much prefer certainty. Yes or no, truth or lie, black or white.

But I think back to my friend, to the suicide. His neck broken by a rope. Garage door opened, a father discovering a still-warm body minutes too late. The frantic seconds of hope as the rope is severed until the possibility of life is denied by the confirmation of death. The unexpected phone call the next morning, the funeral, the burial. The fingerprints on the window as I pressed my nose to the glass to catch one last glimpse of a flower-adorned grave I would never return to.

Was he the rational man or the intuitive man? Monster or hero? Right or wrong?

Those were not the questions I asked in the moments of fear and uncertainty that ensued. When my arrogance was stripped away in the aftermath, I did not ask questions of duality, questions with predisposed answers. I did ask “why?”

but that wasn't my reason for writing. I wrote for the "what?" What happened, what he said, what he did, what I felt, what comes next. In the land between, I sought some connection, an understanding. My classmates saw merely the "why," and the details of my "what" were irrelevant to the question they wanted answered. And perhaps I sought the same, but was more fortunate because in unrelenting pursuit, I still managed to spark something beyond a single question regarding my own creativity—which didn't ever really fail me, but like me, was in the process of becoming.

The creative woman executes her attempt at becoming, wearing no mask, but a human face, asymmetrical, and steps into storm and sun to walk and write beneath them.

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This piece is remarkable to me because it is such an intense meditation on Nietzsche's work—so much so that, as you can see, academic writing conventions (e.g., the use of traditional citations) fall away, much like one finds in published personal essays. The work seems to be about the exercise, itself—certainly not about conforming to the "rules" of writing, as they are often articulated in writing assignment rubrics. Instead, this is an excellent example of an essay that gets into the ring with Nietzsche's concepts of the intuitive man, the rational man, and his Zarathustra. The writer, Holly, is after inspiration, but she wants to get at that inspiration not just conceptually or "in theory"; rather, she wants to get at it through the intuitive experience of writing the essay, itself.

Perhaps as a consequence, the essay is, admittedly, at times laborious—sometimes unwieldy, sometimes confused—but knowing Holly's work, I know that this, in and of itself, constituted much of the risk. Giving her self and the question over entirely to the writing, to exploring and examining her self and the question, was a task unlike any other she'd taken on in prior (non-self-writing

focused) courses. Even in the prior self writing course she completed with me, she did not take the same kinds of risks in her writing; her engagement with the practices of self writing was not as intense and sustained. So, given her relative newness to the practices, the essay is not perfect; it's certainly not an easy read. But, that's part of my point: students, when they are taking great risks like these in self writing, may not write tidy, easy-to-follow, easy-to-interpret essays. I have to do a lot more work, as a reader, in self writing courses because the essays demand much more of me, but that is, to my mind, one of the great benefits to me personally. I am challenged by the readings, as the students are challenged by the writing.

As part of that challenge, Holly is using all of the self writing practices I talked about in Chapter 3—the disparate (i.e., the truth test) and unification. Like Cameron, she starts with a question in order to open up the meditation: why can't she create? In some ways, though, Holly is in a different place from Cameron. She already accepts that she is “drink[ing] constantly of the streams of the greatest creative minds” and that she is, consequently, made by/in that process. Her frustration is that she doesn't know how to “do something” with that making. This difficulty or frustration demonstrates an important point about the practice of unification. Unification is only possible through the practices of meditation—reading and writing—which Holly is clearly already and always participating in as a student; however, to actually make productive the practices of unification, she must “digest” the material she's read and make it her (not her own, but her self), as explained in Chapter 3. She realizes as much later in the essay, when she says that she never allowed herself to become “passionate” in her relation to and work with any of the ideas or texts she talks about in the narrative of her prior training. Her realization suggests a desire for a different level of engagement in meditating on concepts and texts. In short, she realizes that she was learning *about* concepts and texts without learning how to make them do work for/in her.

Clearly, Holly's engagement is different in this essay. She's not just figuring out what Nietzsche's work is about; she's testing out his claims and concepts, applying them to her own life to try to make sense of them (and in turn, to make sense of her self). In particular, she seems to be after a single claim, relentlessly engaging with it throughout her essay: “[the rational man] executes his masterpiece of deception in misfortune.” Holly's question about her own creative life, then, deals in two generative foci for meditation: what does it mean for the rational man to execute his masterpiece of deception in misfortune? And, how might that explain her current frustration and inability to create? What she finds is that in staving off the irrevocable nagging/longing that seems to drive her, in trying to meet that nagging/longing's appetite with various Truths, she's created

an intellectual life that fails to appease that appetite and that succeeds only in making her a “rational man,” a stoic, of sorts—one who is intensely intellectual and [delusionally] not beholden to the damage of longing. Consequently, however, she finds that she’s killed off (or silenced) the productive potentiality of that longing—creativity, itself.

It’s worth noting that in talking with Holly at different points in the process, she made clear to me that the particular practices of the disparate and of unification were not taken up in each paragraph deliberately/consciously. Other practices were clearly taken up deliberately: e.g., her use of shifting tenses in the second paragraph to suggest that her grappling with the ideas she introduces there had not come to any end, and her placement of Nietzsche’s quote at particular points in her essay to frame and create tensions in the work. However, the meditative practices of the disparate and of unification were not (even though, I’m now convinced that, in some ways, Holly’s essay is a reflection on the practices themselves—e.g., on the pay-offs for practicing unification). Point being, I think that the lack of “deliberateness” around the self writing practices is due to Holly having had a chance to practice self writing in an extended essay prior to this one (in a personal essay course she took with me the year before). Given her sustained and intense engagement with the practices in the earlier course, I believe that she had already internalized these practices and was able to reach further, take bigger risks, using them on the page in such a way as to produce a productive self-to-self relation. In fact, at the end of the semester, she shared a letter she addressed to Nietzsche in which she talked about how the engagement with his work enabled a self-on-the-page that transformed her. Holly is, quite simply, not the same writer or individual she was when she walked into the course *because of* the essaying, because of the meditative practices of self writing.

A CONCLUSION

To my mind, it is for these experiences that I teach and that I teach the personal essay in particular. I confess that there was a time in my life when I wrote personal essays because readers/teachers told me I was good at them, and I liked the validation. There was a time, too, that I taught them because my students enjoyed the validating effects of writing papers about themselves. However, now, I know that personal essays can do much more than provide an opportunity for students to have their voices and/or their experiences validated. That’s not to say that this validation is not important; it is, especially when my often-marginalized students (e.g., those who are of ethnic minorities or who live in poverty) find a self-on-the-page that feels more authentic and empowering to them. That said, as a writing teacher, that’s not my only job.

The potential I see in the personal essay and that I see manifest in my students' work (e.g., in Cameron's and Holly's essays) gets right at the heart of what I believe is education's potential. Like any Rhetoric and Composition Ph.D, I have learned the value of diversity, and part of that valuing has meant considerable time and energy, thought and work, devoted to discovering ways of teaching writing that don't simply indoctrinate students into particular conceptions of "the ethical speaker." On the other hand, I've become increasingly uncomfortable with the mantra that "everything is an argument," as well as the attendant assumption that the individual's job is to identify arguments and, then, consciously select which to accept and which to reject. How is simply selecting arguments (or claims), like one selects produce at the grocery store, productive? In our intensely consumerism-driven culture, isn't that practice far too likely to be dictated by one's own preferences and according to one's identity ("I am a vegetarian, so I like broccoli"), instead of by a desire or need for reconciliation, resolution, and/or transformation? How could it possibly enable debate beyond the trappings of "mere spat," as Crowley and Hawhee have called it?

In a recent article in *The New York Times*, Brendan Nyhan (an assistant professor of government at Dartmouth College) writes about a recent study conducted by Yale Law School professor, Dan Kahan, who finds, according to Nyhan, that "with science, as with politics, identity often trumps the facts" (3). In other words, if I identify as a conservative or as a liberal, if I identify as a Christian or an atheist, that identity will win out, when I am faced with facts that may betray or conflict with my own belief system, as a conservative/liberal, Christian/atheist. As a rhetorician, I am deeply invested in the idea that facts are interpretations of information that is, itself, constituted by [discourse-specific] language and formulas for thought. On the other hand, the treatment of all arguments as equal and the belief that one simply can and should select the arguments that one likes or agrees with and reject others are damaging practices that increasingly threaten the productive functioning of this democracy. Obviously, not all arguments are equal (some are more dominant and pervasive than others, for example). Obviously, I cannot simply select what arguments I like and reject others in some belief buffet. Or, perhaps I can, but in order for them to do any real work—on me, on others, on the discourse—choice is not enough. There are whole histories that come with a particular argument (that make the argument make sense) and politics that dictate its value. To ignore both is to rob the argument of its place in those histories and politics, to rob it, in the end, of its ability to be engaged as more than simply a product to be consumed, as more than simply an idea to be adopted to affirm who and what I already think I am.

That said, I recognize that this book is an argument. Of course it is. It must be so. But, that doesn't mean that because I, too, participate in argument in the

writing of this book, then argument is inherently productive or more productive than essaying. In fact, I worry that this book and that the argument made in it will prove impotent—not just because of certain failures working in this particular argument, but because it is one of a world of arguments and because readers who identify as, say, voice pedagogues or social constructionists will reject it out of hand for the fundamental differences it forwards regarding the very principles and axioms on which we work, as writing teachers, scholars, and practitioners.

I don't harbor any delusions about what I'm asking in calling for teachers of writing to get beyond argument, to get beyond paper assignments that ask students to "nail down a thesis" and to argue for it by selecting, "reading," and essentially parroting similar claims made in other sources. We are only encouraging the "buffet-style" thinking about arguments and claims that I've discussed above by doing so. No doubt, my call asks for changes to curriculum that start at our most basic conceptions of what we are and what we should be doing when we teach writing. As we currently, typically teach argument, though, how much hope can we have for real debate, for genuine and rigorous negotiation among individuals and communities around the most important issues at work in our world, when our students are learning to write these kinds of arguments—*without* the sustained and rigorous engagement, the relentless meditation on the larger issues at stake in any argument? As cruel as this indictment sounds, I say it with great conviction: we are fools to think that argument will work. We need a different way, a different set of practices.

According to Spellmeyer in *Arts of Living*, if we want to save the Humanities (including creative and academic writing) from irrelevance, then we must become involved, again, in the "making of culture" (7). In order to make culture, he says that we will have to make connections; we will have to move away from the elitism that is integral to the aristocracy-that-is-the-academy. I'd agree. In part, he is referring to the aristocracy of certain forms (e.g., the argument) over others (e.g., the essay). He's also referring to the aristocracy of readings of texts that are so discipline-specific that they are utterly inaccessible to any scholar or student outside of that discipline. Too, though, I think he is referring to the aristocracy of certain kinds of evidence and certain kinds of knowledge-making in the academy—an aristocracy that shuts out any other kind of engagement with ideas, with beliefs, with arguments.

Spellmeyer uses these claims to set up the argument that he has made in many of his works: that it is in the "universal" human experience that we discover connections with our fellow beings. I'd suggest, though, that it is in the variation and differences among us that we can discover connections—connections that are not constituted in sameness but in the infinite variety (in the encounter with the other that is the self, for example), which when brought into a produc-

tive relation, enables endless possibilities for exploration and new “knowing.” In other words, I think that the poststructuralists who have taught us the power-play of difference and the tyranny of sameness have offered anyone invested in the personal essay an opportunity to articulate, to encourage, and to explore all of the “difference” and the dynamics at work in those differences that many poststructuralist thinkers, the so-called “elitists,” have theorized for so many decades now. In short, it is personal essay scholars, practitioners, and teachers who have an opportunity to help to save the Humanities by teaching and enabling productive debate: by sharing and practicing ways of engaging with ideas and beliefs, ways of engaging with individuals and communities that get beyond the failures of argument.

I can't give up on the possibility of a just world—or at least a just writing assignment. I think that essaying can be exactly that. It provides students with the opportunity to engage rigorously with a topic or question and in a sustained (though, perhaps unwieldy) exercise. It teaches them the value of writing-through a question. It does not ask them to answer some enormous question (like whether the death penalty is just or unjust, whether abortion is an issue of the fetus's rights or the mother's, whether stricter gun laws would infringe on our human rights or better protect them, etc.) in a single statement and to forward that thesis concisely and without thoroughly addressing and examining any complications to it. If our students' arguments in our own courses—courses that are supposed to deal explicitly with written articulation and negotiation of ideas and beliefs—have proven to be ultimately impotent in changing the game (the game being written articulation and negotiation inside and outside of our classrooms), then isn't it time to think differently, to be innovative in our thinking around the training of student writers, as both future writers in their disciplines and as citizens?

It is for this possibility—our own, our students', and even the Humanities'—that I offer this book.

NOTES

37. In “Attitudes toward Imitation,” Dale Sullivan takes this passage from Quintilian to mean that “[w]ide reading, though not exactly an exercise, is imitative in nature because it is based on the assumption that students will unconsciously assimilate stylistic qualities, rhetorical strategies, and a fund of ideas from great writers” (14). Perhaps Sullivan is correct in his reading of the implicit assumptions at work in this form of imitation; likely, it is the same series of assumptions at work in teaching students the essay by having them read lots of canonized essays. Students are assumed to pick up the insights and strategies of great writers through what looks

like a process of osmosis. As I have shown in Chapter 4, though, imitation can be a meditative practice—one that requires a different kind of engagement.

38. On a related note, by encouraging the practice of reading and writing-in-response to texts, I help my students to avoid the experience of being so overwhelmed with the concepts and movement of a dense text that they “retain nothing” or “forget themselves.” Foucault explains: “[W]ithout taking notes or constituting a treasure store of reading—one is liable to retain nothing, to spread oneself across different thoughts, and to forget oneself” (“Self Writing” 211). Here, Foucault is suggesting more than the experience of forgetting what one has read; he’s suggesting that in forgetting what one has read, one forgets his/her [constituted] self—the self that has been made in the practice of reading. For this reason and others, the symbiotic practices of reading and writing are absolutely essential to students’ success in the course.