Beyond the Narrative Mode in the Composition Classroom: Embracing a Return to the Personal Essay

Hayley Mitchell Haugen
Ohio University Southern Campus

There is no idea so frivolous or odd which does not appear to me to be fittingly produced by the mind of man. -- Montaigne

As spring finally takes a tentative hold of the newly green landscape of northeastern Kentucky, I am sitting comfortably in my living room, grading one last batch of student essays before the semester ends. The deer emerge confidently from the hillside for their usual evening snack of whatever it is they find to eat on my front lawn, and I watch them quietly as I reflect on the term now behind me. I am happy in the reminiscence that I organized my Freshman Composition course so thoroughly that I was able to keep my students on track throughout the term.

My course evaluations will reflect that my course was a success, as students invariably agree that I am well organized, that I offer specific writing assignments, and that I am "easy to relate to" and always "there" for them when they need me. What they do not know, however, is that I have cheated them. Like the deer that tread confidently into my front yard because they know it is safe there, I have once again stepped lightly into the classroom, treating it as a safe space with my standard stock of tried and true thesis-driven essay assignments.

Among other tasks, these assignments teach inductive and deductive reasoning, definition claims, and how to construct airtight, fallacy-free arguments with healthy doses of logos, ethos,

and pathos on the side. I have convinced myself they are the kinds of assignments that will ensure my students' success in future classes outside of the English department, but in my heart, that space where my poet-self still resides, I know these assignments do not encourage my students to be writers in any real sense. My students may leave my classroom feeling as though they have gotten their money's worth, but I know they are shortchanged in the fact that I have not truly allowed them to discover any real joy in writing.

The truth is, incrementally, almost imperceptibly, I have become one of those teachers who C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon say seem to believe that "what students say matters less than how they say it, that learning to manipulate strategies and genres is more important than thinking well in language or discovering personal stances and values" (47). While I *know* there is a better way, I have begun to place "emphasis on conventions instead of meaning," implying that the "conventions matter more than anything else, that manipulating audiences through technical virtuosity is the ultimate purpose of learning to write" (47).

Knoblauch and Brannon might suggest I pry loose the grip that ancient rhetorical tradition has on my modern classroom, but I'm not convinced I can so easily abandon the ancient rhetoricians. Learning to embrace the different, more creative, and less frequently acknowledged elements of this tradition may be the way for me to go instead. The ancient art of rhetoric recognizes and celebrates the ambiguity of language; rhetoric speculates about the world and invites others to make their own speculations. The essays we assign our students to write, such as the narrative essay, however, discourage ambiguity and speculation. They force students to write about what they already *know* about their lives or the world around them. Composition instructors should turn, instead, to the personal essay via the father of the form, Michel de

Montaigne. Montaigne's example encourages students to explore their lives and only *attempt* to make sense of them. Unlike the stiff narrative essay encouraged by modes-based readers, the personal essay is invigorated by creativity, spontaneity, and personal discovery. If we yearn for our students to experience writing in this light, we need to create a space in our classrooms that allows for Aristotle's art of wondering and encourages Plato's motley of ideas. We need to promote students' ruminations about life, rather than privilege their explaining of it, in a space that allows for vulnerability and contradictions along their paths to discovery.

William A. Covino offers a way onto these paths in his description of the often unacknowledged creative elements of ancient rhetorical tradition in his essay, "The Classical Art of Wondering: Plato, Aristotle, Cicero." Covino notes that despite the fact that since the 1960's "invention and discovery in composition scholarship and pedagogy has recalled an Aristotle who provides 'topics' rather than rules, and who illuminates discourse as too complex for reduction to the terms of positivist science," a "common emphasis still prevails upon rhetoric as *technique*" (9). The history of rhetoric, Covino explains, is one of a "progressive denial of the ambiguity of language and literature," a slow ossification into "stock recitations and formulas" (9), so that by 1840 DeQuincey mourned the "forgotten rhetoric of ambiguity" and called for a "return to discourse that exploits uncertainty, the play of 'inversions, evolutions, and harlequin changes that eddy about the truth'" (9). The "forgotten" rhetors are those who elaborate Plato's conception of rhetoric as an "art of wondering, and writing as a mode of *avoiding* rather than *intending* closure" (9), Covino contends. In this light, we have done the ancients a disservice in assuming that "philosophical and literary 'greatness' is accomplished by philosophical and literary unity and coherence" (10). In taking Plato's *Phaedrus* as an example, Covino says

critics' urgency to find a subject or purpose in the piece neglects the "irresolute complexity that informs philosophical rhetoric and writing for Plato" (10). By simply "understanding the *Phaedrus* as a unified system of discourse principles, or as a lesson about love or wisdom or beauty, we mimic the limitations of Phaedrus himself, the boy who would rather acquire and memorize facts and concepts than ask questions" (13). What the *Phaedrus* is ultimately *about*, however, is the "art of wondering, about rhetoric and writing and reading as play with an expanding horizon" (21).

Covino explains that like the *Phaedrus*, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is also often regarded as a "body of precepts and principles that can be represented schematically" (21). For Aristotle, however, a "rhetor's exploration is propelled by indeterminacy" (25). As evidenced in Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, Covino says, "the art of rhetoric underlines the ambiguity of language; to practice the art, one remains mindful that all conclusions are provisional, tentative" (25).

Finally, despite the fact that Cicero has come under fire by contemporary critics such as Knoblauch and Brannon for promoting a "ceremonial view of discourse among students" and reducing writing to a "ritual performance" (Covino 33), Covino reminds us that Cicero's contribution to the field of rhetoric can, like Plato and Aristotle's, be understood as the "identification of rhetoric and writing with irresolution and ambiguity" (34). Cicero, Covino argues, champions the importance of the orator as a philosopher, "constantly engaged in speculation in all the subjects that affect human affairs" (35). We should note, then, that Cicero's *De Oratore* should not be read as an exposition on rhetoric, but as a "*demonstration* of the vast art sketched in the introduction, a demonstration which warns students against the tendency to reduce rhetoric to an academic box by dramatizing the impossibility of settling on the nature of

eloquence and rhetorical effectiveness" (37).

While Covino laments the fact that "techniques, rules, and formulas for composing and arranging *finished* discourse fill the handbooks that comprise the mainstream tradition" (9), and he encourages contemporary rhetoricians to reconsider the famous works of the ancients as more than templates for these rules and formulas, he does not offer practical advice for applying the true "art of wondering" in the composition classroom. It is one thing to reread Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero as being in resistance to these rules and formulas, but quite another entirely to encourage our first-year composition students to abandon these rules (rules they likely do not even connect in their minds as being attributed to the rhetors of ancient Greece) in their own work. How, then, to encourage ambiguity, uncertainty, indeterminacy, and play in our students' compositions?

One solution is to move, once and for all, away from the mode-oriented classroom that requires students to think of writing in terms of fulfilling certain requirements of structure and content. A place to begin is with the commonly first assigned task in modes-based composition classrooms: the personal narrative. While narrative techniques in and of themselves are helpful for students to learn, when assigned the personal narrative, student compositions become little more than a rehashing of these techniques, which unfortunately offer little room for true personal discovery. Thus, composition instructors should consider replacing the personal narrative exercise with the personal *essay*, reminiscent of the work of Michel de Montaigne.

Caught in the Mode Trap

In contemporary journals devoted to composition and rhetoric, there is no shortage of

arguments against reliance on the modes in the composition classroom. In fact, Dr. Sherrie Gradin, co-editor of the decidedly non-modal composition reader, *Writing as Reflective Action*, assures graduate students in her Rhetorical Traditions class at Ohio University that not only are the modes in current disfavor in the academy, they are all but dead. While the death of the modes may be an accepted fact among advanced rhetoricians–scholars who have had both the time and experience to develop their teaching pedagogies–or teaching assistants lucky enough to be trained under them before being tossed into the fray of the composition classroom, my own early experience in the field suggests that the modes remain seductive to the inexperienced first-year composition instructor.

When I began my teaching career as an adjunct instructor at a large community college in California, in the late 1990s, I had two master's degrees hanging on my home-office wall but no classroom teaching experience, aside from working as a Poet in the Schools in Washington State. I had embraced "writing as a process" in the various writing labs I had tutored in up to that point, but I had no teaching pedagogy to speak of. At my interview for this particular community college, the only question I was asked that required some sense of pedagogy was whether or not I would teach description to first-year composition students. Coming from a creative writing background – where description is generally considered a good thing – I instinctively answered *yes* and got the job.

A week later, the department secretary asked for my book order requests. When I expressed concern for having to make this choice, the Dean of English directed me to the campus bookstore to check the shelves for texts others were using. At a community college serving over 28,000 students, and in an English department nearly 80% comprised of adjunct instructors, it

was not surprising for me to find other terrified first-time instructors, blank book requisition forms in hand, also scouring the campus bookstore shelves. Many of us settled on modes-based readers. They were safe because we remembered them from our own freshman writing experiences, and their neatly categorized chapters offered us ready-made course plans. While the fulltime faculty at this college adopted different, modeless texts for their classrooms, for the three years that I worked there – blindly, happily teaching the modes – no one ever suggested I should do otherwise. Fresh out of college, I was happy to be teaching at all and didn't think about the social, political, or pedagogical implications of teaching the modes, nor did I think to question the seeming lack of pedagogy in that department overall.

That was 1995, so surely much has changed, right? Not really. Mode-oriented textbooks are still being printed, after all. And yes, I checked; they remain on the bookstore shelf at the California community college where my career began. To be fair, the editors of contemporary modes texts do seem to be making some effort to answer the current criticism against them. In the 2003 edition of *The Bedford Reader*, for example, the preface to instructors notes that the book has been updated to present a "realistic treatment of the rhetorical methods" (vi). The editors assure instructors that the ten methods of development are treated "not as boxes to be stuffed full of verbiage, but as tools for inventing, for shaping, and, ultimately, for accomplishing a purpose" (vi).

Apart from this introductory disclaimer and *many* more pictures than earlier editions, this eighth edition of *The Bedford Reader* reads much like the edition I adopted for my freshmen in 1995. While the editors may claim that the modes are offered as *tools* for writing, the checklists for writing at the end of each chapter continue to stuff student writing back in the box. The

checklist at the end of the Narration chapter, for example, encourages students to check themselves against shifts in point of view, and it reminds them that if they have chosen any other approach than a chronological organization to their piece, they must be sure to have a "compelling reason for altering it" (81). Editors even warn students to police their use of creativity in their narratives: "If you start somewhere other than the beginning of the story or use flashbacks at any point, will your readers benefit from your creativity?" (81) Indeed, clarity is highly privileged over creativity in the checklist: "Have you used transitions to help clarify the order of events?" the editors ask. "Will [the point] of your narrative be clear to readers? . . . Your story should focus on a central idea" (81). Directives such as these illustrate a failure on the editors' part to consider how creativity may actually help students reach clarity in their work.

As if the narration checklist is not confining enough, the suggestions for narrative writing topics at the end of the chapter also work to limit students' ideas in more ways than they work to advance fresh insights. Students are directed to choose from a list of topics including the following:

> A memorable experience from your early life
>
> A lesson you learned the hard way
>
> An embarrassing moment that taught you something
>
> A monumental misunderstanding
>
> A trip into unfamiliar territory (125)

and more of the like. The problem with personal narrative topics such as these is that they lead students into writing about the things they already *know*. While students may learn to organize their thoughts into a coherent narrative story, and while they may try some interesting narrative

techniques in the process, these topics suggest students should know all the answers *before* they write, that they should already understand the beginning, middle, and ends of the adventures of their lives. Thus, first-year writing instructors read a countless influx of grandma or grandpa dying stories, my-drunk-driving-friend-who-got-killed-and-taught-me-a-lesson compositions, and the ever- popular sports narrative. While these *are* important incidents in our students' lives, the personal narrative, as taught in modes-based texts such as *The Bedford Reader*, belittle these events by suggesting there are only a number of ways these life events can be told. As a result, students barely ever scratch beyond the cliché, safe surface of these narratives to discover anything new about themselves or the world they live in. Instructors should encourage the kind of thought – the art of wondering – that the personal *essay* can bring forth instead.

In "Reflections on the Peculiar Status of the Personal Essay," Wendell V. Harris contends, "the essential and defining quality of the *personal* essay as distinct from the programmatic and informational essay is rarer than is generally realized – and all the more valuable" (934). Quite different than the kinds of narrative essays I have noted as elicited by *The Bedford Reader*, the best personal essays, Harris agrees, "are informal in tone, arise out of some form of personal experience, and include some degree of personal meditation. They offer curious modes of thought, unexpected turns, and memorably phrased personal observations" (936).

Harris also notes specifically what the personal essay is not: "informational, which includes the instructional, technical, analytical, and advisory, and the programmatic, which includes the didactic, admonitory, and hortatory" (936). Instead, the immediate effect of the successful personal essay is simply the consciousness of participating in an individual way of looking at things, of savoring the striking or pungent phrasing that gives force to the author's

individual point of view, or of pursuing fresh thoughts of one's own for which the unique mental organization of the author has somehow been a catalyst. (936)

Like many composition instructors, Harris notices that the personal essays (what I call narrative essays) frequently assigned in composition classrooms are often simply those which–shockingly!–allow for the use of "I" or which simply include a smattering of personal anecdotes or other autobiographical moments (939). "But the writing of a personal essay requires much more than the employment of the first person singular pronoun," Harris writes. "The personal essay is built on an individual's thoughtful, unhurried reflection on certain experiences that seem to have an interesting significance, and upon the development of a prose style that makes possible the projection of the quality of mind of the person setting out those reflections" (939).

Finally, the personal essay cannot be contained, or boxed into a series of checklists for revision. Rather, as Harris notes, "the personal essay most often opens out, moving from the individually experienced, perhaps trivial, occurrence to the larger insight, in the process creating the sense of widening horizons that belongs to the inductive movement of the mind" (944).

Essayer the Essay

For inspiration in widening our students' horizons, we can turn to Michel de Montaigne, widely accepted as the father of the personal essay. In the mid sixteenth century, Montaigne coined the French, *essayer*, to essay. In French, to essay is to attempt, to try. As an art form, the noun *essay*, taking its cues from the verb form, becomes, through Montaigne's example, indicative of an exploratory, open form, a form in which the writer *attempts* to make sense of his world.

Noted as the first author to go public with writings focused on the self, in Montaigne, we see the writer reacting to life, art, and literature, while offering readers glimpses into his own daily activities, a unique self, responding to the world. This self, however, is a self in motion, a constantly wavering, undulating thing. Montaigne admits to these fluctuations of the self, and he does not expect to have all the answers.

One of the central characteristics of his work, for example, is contradiction. "Contradictory judgments neither offend me nor irritate me," Montaigne writes in "On the Art of Conversion:" "they merely wake me up and provide me with exercise" (138). He adds, "When I am contradicted it arouses my attention not my wrath. I move towards the man who contradicts me: he is instructing me" (138). In this light, his explorations into the self are not about being (or being right, writing for the sake of documenting what he knows for sure), but becoming, capturing true moments of discovery which may or may not contradict his original beliefs. The essay, then, becomes more about the *process* of those discoveries, those explorations of the world and the self, than about the end results.

However, our students can benefit from the lesson that Montaigne's explorations of self do not take place in a vacuum. Upon my own introduction to Montaigne's work, for example, I was not expecting his thoughtful meanderings–or digressions–from what I saw as his topics on hand into issues of politics and philosophy. I was not expecting his many historical and literary allusions and quotations surrounding his anecdotes of a more personal nature, those of Montaigne the *man*. Montaigne's characteristic use of digressions, allusions, and quotations all remind us that he is a man *in* the world. While we might view the personal memoir as using the personal to explain the personal, the personal *essay* is not confined to the author's personal

space. While he is writing about himself, Montaigne is not a self uninfluenced by outside forces. He embraces the world outside himself in his essays in an effort to check himself against and react to the views of others.

Phillip Lopate notes in *The Art of the Personal Essay*, "one of the most radical of Montaigne's practices was to follow his thoughts no matter where they led him. The result conveyed the spontaneity of mental discovery, on the one hand, and a heedless lack of structure on the other" (45). Whereas the Freshman Composition student often clings to the safe, ready-made structures found in the mode-driven chapters of her text, Montaigne allows himself to "get lost." In "On Vanity," he explains his "ideas do follow from each other, though sometimes at a distance, and have regard for each other, though somewhat obliquely" (Montaigne 177).

In reading Plato, Montaigne finds one of the dialogues (most likely the *Phaedrus*) to be "parti-coloured, a motley of ideas," where the "top deals with love and all the bottom with rhetoric. They [the dialogues?] were not afraid of such changes, and have a marvelous charm when letting themselves be blown along by the wind, or appearing to be so" (177). Later, Montaigne admonishes the reader (and, by extension, we might add the writer) who is not up to the challenges of following such meandering thoughts in his own or others' works. "It is the undiligent reader who loses my subject not, I," he warns. "In a corner somewhere you can always find a word or two on my topic, adequate despite being so squeezed tight. I change subjects violently and chaotically. My pen and my mind both go a-roaming. If you don't want more dullness, you must accept a touch of madness" (177).

As instructors, if we are willing to accept a little chaos and madness in our students, we have an opportunity here to encourage full classrooms of pens and minds to go a-roaming.

Following Montaigne's lead, after all, students can find the permission they may be seeking to break away from the form of the oft-assigned personal narrative. Through the personal *essay* they can find a space to write about themselves, to listen to [themselves] and to find that form which is entirely [their] own (Montaigne "Art" 133).

Recognizing the value of such a practice, Roberta M. Palumbo encourages instructors to embrace the personal essay in her 1978 piece, "Montaigne in the Composition Classroom." At that time, she found "that whereas the basic expository essay of college writing classes usually relies on the established format of introduction, development, and conclusion, the personal essay represents a kind of thinking and writing that is free from the constraint of a prescribed pattern" (383). Palumbo agrees that Montaigne's conception of the personal essay "allows the writer to observe his or her own life and discover certain kinds of truth about human existence" (382). Experience, as she says, therefore "becomes a means to probe the moral and intellectual questions that all human beings must face" (382), the essay, a means to "chart the nature of man" (383).

Readings in the Composition Classroom

Despite Palumbo's call for an induction of Montaigne in the composition classroom, the personal essay, it seems, has failed to gain a popular following among composition instructors. Most often one finds its proponents among the ranks of creative writing departments, a staple of course offerings in creative non-fiction. In the composition course, however, the personal narrative–if it is assigned at all by fledgling instructors–still reigns King. The task, then, remains to find a means by which our students will be influenced to *essay* rather than narrate their lives.

The first obvious step is to discourage new instructors from adopting modes-based texts for their courses. The next step, it seems, is to simply adopt readers or course packs including texts illustrative of the essayistic stance.

In "Reading(s) in the Writing Classroom," David Foster explains that readings selected for composition classrooms are, not surprisingly, generally selected for their "modeling effect and their stimulative impact" (518). Even our best intentions in this arena, however, can go astray. For instance, in a two-semester study of his Freshman composition students, Foster found that his students–when given the choice–infrequently modeled their own writing after the textual strategies of their readings (519), and "not many [students] felt sufficiently strong stimulus from the topics of the readings to generate essay pieces of their own on these subjects" (534).

In his classroom, Foster gave his students the freedom to create and develop their own topics, and while he encouraged them to adapt particular writing styles of the authors they were studying, he never required them to do so outside of informal writing exercises created for that purpose (521). In these informal writings, Foster says his students were "provoked, angered, awed, and amused in ways which, they repeatedly made clear, strengthened their sense of what texts and writers could do" (535), but when it came time to write formal essays, they were cautious and sensitive to the fact that the grades for the course were weighted most heavily on the formal essays.

Instead of allowing the same readings they responded to passionately in their informal work to influence their stylistic choices of their formal essays, Foster's students became "acutely sensitive to the dangers involved in writing essays" (535). Indeed, he says, though I often encouraged them to take risks as essayists, this bit of pedagogical hopefulness had only a modest

impact on the writerly intentions of these savvy students. . . . The lack of reading/writing transferability in the essays of this study, therefore, is in part a function of students' wariness about the price of free agency within the constraints of institutional evaluation. (535-6)

While Foster doesn't contend to have had Montaigne's approach to the essay in mind when structuring his composition course, based on the amount of freedom he gave his students to come up with their own topics, it is likely that he hoped they might view themselves as essayists in the same light. Foster was careful not to force his students into mirroring the writing techniques of their readings–which would have been akin to following the modes and contrary to his point of his experiment. Thus, it is hard to tap into what he may have done differently to achieve more experimentation from his students.

One might suggest, however, that the readings Foster chose for his course were not essayistic enough in themselves to inspire his students beyond the safe narrative styles to which they had grown accustomed. In working with Cullen Murphy's, "The Longest Day," Annie Dillard's, "The Fixed," from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and Judy Brady's, "I Want A Wife," Foster admits to choosing readings for his project that typify those found in composition course readers (522). While each of these essays has merit and certainly deserves to be anthologized, if we expect students to break away from their typical modes of writing, we need to provide them with readings beyond the typical as well.

Composition instructors do not need to spend hours scouring the literary journals individually for such atypical works in an effort to create elaborate, inspiring course packs, however. Anthologies already exist that include challenging, contemporary essays by authors (including Dillard and some of our other favorites) breaking free from the mode-labeled chapters

of the previous anthologies to which editors have relegated much of their earlier work. One such collection is Robert Atwan's *Best American Essays: College Edition*.

Appearing in two consecutive volumes of the *Best American Essays* anthology, Natalie Kusz's essay "Vital Signs" is an excellent example of the kind of essay capable of moving students beyond the safe narrative structures encouraged by their modes-based readers. Kusz's essay is especially interesting to me because the personal events she explores here, are, in essence, a return to material she has written about previously in her book-length memoir, *Road Song*.

While Kusz is writing about a tragic, life-changing incident that–like our students in writing their own stories–she already knows the personal implications of, in its move from the personal memoir to the personal *essay*, Kusz's story takes on new, broader meanings as well. This change emerges in part from Kusz's leap from the safe, chronological telling of her memoir, to a more seemingly random ordering of events in the essay. Her differing approach forces her to look at her story from new angles and consider others' perspectives about the events that transpired. Additionally, Kusz's new position as essayist rather than memoirist encourages surprising moments of questioning–questions about herself, her memory, human nature in general–and discovery than her earlier handling of the material produces.

In brief, "Vital Signs" is about Kusz's physical and emotional survival after being attacked by dogs as a child. The attack leaves her near death and so badly disfigured her mother prays that she will die in the first hours after the incident. She does, however, survive the accident, and she remains both haunted and inspired by what transpires afterwards for the rest of her life.

Kusz numbers and titles each of the five sections of her essay. In lessons on narrative in modes-based textbooks, our students are often encouraged to begin their personal narratives as close to the main action or conflict as possible. Rather than begin with an account of the gruesome attack itself, however, Kusz opens her piece with a thorough glimpse of her life in the hospital for many months after the attack. She includes many details about her personal physical struggle in this first section, but the bulk of part one reflects on the experiences of *other* children in her ward. Like Montaigne who looks outside himself for others against which to check himself, in recalling the other children from this period of her life, Kusz discovers that she "grew as much older from watching [them] as they did from being taught" lessons from the nurse on their floor (Kusz 265). Kusz's discoveries about human nature in this first section of her essay are so moving that readers forget momentarily that they have yet to learn the cause of Kusz's wounds. From two wheelchair-bound boys, Thomas and Nick, for example, Kusz learns how best friends' dispositions can "reverberate within one another," in this case, "the self-reliant and the needy" (265). In ten-year-old Darcy, whose second kidney transplant is as likely to fail as her first, Kusz finds a child who, unlike many of the other children on the ward, is unwilling to accept the inevitability of death. Darcy's family is angered and afraid of her illness (268), and they do not allow her to socialize with the other children who are so forthcoming about the possibility of their own deaths. By protecting Darcy from such talk, this family represents a different kind of coping mechanism than Kusz and the other children are used to seeing on their otherwise very open and honest ward. Darcy becomes an enigma in that the other children "had no chance to comfort her, to offer our hands when she was weak, we could not count on her during our worst times, for she and her family suffered in that peculiar way that admits no

fellowship" (269).

Kusz concludes part one of her essay with a discussion of three-year-old Samuel, "one of my smallest teachers" (269), who suffered from leukemia. Never complaining about the pain of his condition or the treatments he received, Samuel becomes a symbol of strength and courage for the other children on the ward. Kusz writes, he "possessed, even for his age, and in spite of the fact that he was so vulnerable, an implicit feeling of security, and it was partly this sense of trust that lent him that dignity I have found in few grown people" (270). Here, Kusz briefly steps out of the present time of her story to comment on what she learned with the benefit of adult hindsight. Although this is a subtle example of the technique, encouraging our students to embrace such creative shifts in time in their own work can lead to similar moments of discovery and reflexivity. In addition to making this creative leap, Kusz, unlike many of our students, is also willing to admit in her essay that despite her profound realizations in the hospital, she still does not have all life's answers about the terminally ill: "I have heard the debate over whether terminally ill children know they are going to die, and I can't, even after knowing Samuel, answer this question" (270), she says. Despite not having a definitive answer to this question, Kusz pushes herself toward understanding, noting,

> we all, to some extent, knew what death was, simply because each of us had been friends with someone who was gone, and we realized that at some point many of us were likely to die; this likelihood was enough certainly for us, and made the question of time and date too insignificant to ask. (270)

Although part one of Kusz's essay can easily stand alone as an individual piece, Kusz

continues to essay her ordeal. In part two she relates the story of her attack. This short section is full of the suspenseful, sensory and horrible details that one would expect in a narrative about a small child being attacked by dogs. Her approach is strictly chronological, but she admits to having to speculate on how some of the key events played out. Kusz continues with the theme of speculation in the third and fourth parts of her essay, which become, in part, musings on the fallibility of memory. While the memoirist (or our students recalling their own life events) may be unwilling to admit to lapses in memory, the essayist often interrogates the reliability of her memory. Kusz's mistrust of her memory is made clear in her insistence that her mother retell *her* version of the attack many times during her childhood. Even as a child, Kusz wants to be sure to have a complete version of her story; she gains comfort in the knowing. As the physical trauma she suffers understandably leaves gaps in her own memory, she must depend on others to fill in the blanks. This admittance that memory cannot always be trusted (along with the subsequent inclusion of Kusz's retelling of her mother's version of the attack) is an excellent reminder to student writers that even their most personal life events can be told and reevaluated from other perspectives.

In concluding her essay, Kusz takes the surprising step of flashing forward into the present time of her adult life. This section of the essay contains no mention of the dog attack, Kusz's childhood hospitalization, or her mother. Despite what we may have previous taught our students about concluding their own personal narratives, Kusz's piece does nothing to overtly connect to or reflect back on what's come before. She writes instead about writer's block and her longing to return to the beach where she has recently vacationed. She notes that she has recently bought a meat-eating one-eyed fish that "looks terribly dashing, swimming around with his bad

eye outward, unafraid that something might attack him from his blind side" (287). Kusz admits she "found myself watching him [the fish] for the ways he was like me" (287), but she relies on the reader at the end of her essay to connect the symbolism of the fish back into the lessons of adaptation and survival that are inherent in the rest of her piece. The writer of personal narrative may feel obliged to clarify this lesson, but the essayist cannot resist the opportunity for play and ambiguity. Thus at the end of her essay, Kusz, like her fish, "turns a dead eye to the others [her readers] and swims away, seeking more interesting things to look at" (288).

And Now?

Kusz's essay is an example of the magical writing that can occur when we allow ourselves to break from the constraints of the traditional personal narrative. Here is an author probing the difficult circumstances of her life, retelling a familiar personal story from a new angle, re-visioning the events of her life and continuing to discover new meanings that exist about herself and about humanity.

If one of our goals as composition instructors is for our students to achieve similar insights about themselves and their world through their personal essays, we should privilege the free agency that allows for these insights–adjusting our grading rubrics accordingly. If we assign our students simple narrative exercises, they will write about what they already know about themselves in the world, unlikely to awaken their sense of discovery. The papers we will receive in return will be retellings of personal events they've already worked through, in the narrative structures with which they are most comfortable. The impact of these "essays" will be unsurprising for both author and audience; there is little to discover there, as the emotions, long-

since accepted, will arrive on the scene sadly over-baked.

Inspired by course readings that test and break the boundaries of the traditional personal narrative, however, the self-knowledge that our students come to through their own writing has the potential to be a raw kind of knowledge, something fresh and still bleeding a little around the edges, something perhaps a little sticky and possibly unpleasant to handle. Encouraged to *essay* rather than narrate their lives, our students will leave our classrooms with a sense that they have made true personal discoveries, a sense that there is still more they can wonder about in their lives, more on which to ruminate, more of themselves to explore.

Works Cited

Covino, William A. "The Classical Art of Wondering: Plato, Aristotle, Cicero." *The Art of Wondering: A Revisionist Return to the History of Rhetoric*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1988. 5-43.

Foster, David. "Reading(s) in the Writing Classroom." *College Composition and Communication*. 48.4 (Dec. 1997), 518-539.

Harris, Wendell V. "Reflections on the Peculiar Status of the Personal Essay." *College English*. 58.8 (Dec. 1996), 934-53.

Kennedy, X. J. et al.. *The Bedford Reader*. Boston: Bedford, 2003.

Knoblauch, C.H. and Brannon, Lil.. "Ancient Rhetoric in Modern Classrooms: That Old- Time Religion." *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1984. 23-50.

Kusz, Natalie. "Vital Signs." *The Best American Essays*: *College Edition*. Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Houghton, 1995. 263-88.

Lopate, Phillip. *The Art of the Personal Essay*. New York: Anchor, 1994.

Montaigne, Michel de. "On the Art of Conversation." *English 592 Course Pack*. Ed. David Lazar. Athens, OH: Duplication Station, 2002. 137-149.

---. "On Vanity." *English 592 Course Pack*. Ed. David Lazar. Athens, OH: Duplication Station, 2002. 150-181.

Palumbo, Roberta M.. "Montaigne in the Composition Classroom." *College Composition and Communication*. 29.4 (Dec. 1978), 382-384.