

VOICE, TRANSFORMED: THE POTENTIALITIES OF STYLE PEDAGOGY IN THE TEACHING OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

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At the end of her “Voice as Echo of Delivery, Ethos as Transforming Process,” Theresa Enos asks a question that I, too, have sought to answer in every composition pedagogy I’ve developed, modified, or discarded over these first seven years of my teaching career: “Can we show [students] that their essays, even “academic” essays, can be . . . affirmations that rest on demonstrated openness and comprehensiveness—all this expressed by a transformed voice that seeks identification without sacrificing conviction?” (1994, p. 194). We most often encounter such a voice in writing that situates the self, the sort of writing published in *The Best American Essays* with a lineage that goes back to Montaigne, essays that are usually only assigned in a handful of “creative” English courses that privilege the personal. But we encounter this voice, too, in the writings of scholars like Jim Corder, Wendy Bishop, bell hooks, Victor Villanueva, Gloria Anzaldúa and others who incorporate strong but fallibly human selves who strive toward greater understanding of whatever issues they choose to explore. After using a style-based pedagogy in an advanced composition course focused on creative nonfiction,¹ I think I might finally be able to answer Enos’s question (at least tentatively) with a yes. I’ve found that a style-based pedagogy has the potential to show students ways to transform their voices into the type of open, comprehensive ones Enos describes; such voices in the context of rhetorically-conscious essays have the potential to affect wide-reaching audiences.

However, a problem arises from the insufficient style resources available for those who teach creative nonfiction themed classes. When I first started conceptualizing the creative nonfiction themed advanced composition course I will later describe, I found plenty of instructive craft essays in textbooks and other craft publications like *The Writer’s Chronicle* that touched on style in a broad sense, but, as to be expected, I had a difficult time finding texts positioned from a creative writing standpoint that would aid students in understanding sentence-level style from a rhetorical standpoint.² These discipline-based perspectives, though, are not as disparate as they might seem because in the end

those who offer instruction all want the same result: good writing that fits the given genre. It's just that most style-related creative nonfiction craft essays that instructors, and thus, students, likely come across provide unproblematic impressionistic criteria to judge and explain style but do not give writers the tools to learn how to make stylistic decisions, an essential skill to producing good creative nonfiction.

From my both/and position as a degree holding, aspiring creative nonfiction writer and a degree seeking, aspiring composition scholar, I find myself serendipitously situated to speak to the need for greater stylistic guidance in nonfiction prose courses. I see the relative silence and ambiguities regarding style in anthologized creative nonfiction craft essays as an opportunity, as potentially useful uncharted territory for both teachers and students; therefore, I'd like to explore how anthologized creative writing craft essayists—who so readily share their writing experiences and thoughtful suggestions with those who might follow their lead—attend to or avoid the more technical, sentence-level aspects of writing, or what Chris Holcomb and M. Jimmie Killingsworth refer to in their chapter as the textual arena. Based on Tim Mayers's discussion of core assumptions about creative writing that permeate the discipline, he would likely point to the idea that “[s]tudents, assuming they're motivated enough, can learn to master craft, but they either have or do not have the other essentials of a ‘serious writer,’ and nothing a teacher of creative writing does can change this” (2005, p. 13). This assumption, if indeed widely held by those who identify with the dominant ideologies of creative writing over those of composition, might explain why instructional value of the textual arena is diminished. It is at the word and sentence level where writers distinguish themselves; this is where unique voices emerge. But this micro level of writing is also viewed as expression, as genius, as the man himself. Mayers refers to this idea of genius—that writers either have it or they don't—as part of the problematic “institutional-conventional wisdom of creative writing” (2005, p. 13). Style works to demystify “genius” by upholding the idea that all writers make rhetorical choices, whether conscious or internalized, that have certain effects on their audiences.

Undergraduates studying essayistic composing—especially typical non-geniuses at the beginner or intermediate level—can benefit from stylistic instruction just as other composition students can.³ Regardless of whether a creative nonfiction course is housed in composition or creative writing,³⁹ style study in such courses has the potential to demystify what makes flash essays, travel memoirs, literary journalism, nature writing, and so on, different from the more traditional forms of academic writing to which they are accustomed. Yes, style is only one aspect of creative nonfiction, only one fifth of the rhetorical canon to

emphasize in a class that can cover so much else. But teaching the importance of style analysis and production helps students new to the form understand what it means when they are asked to write in an open, identification-seeking, literary way. Vivian Gornick explains to writers in *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* that “[e]very work [of literature] has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say” (2001, p. 13). I tell my students that the “stories” in creative nonfiction pieces emerge in part from the style of the writing that begins at the sentence level and moves outward.

Chris Anderson also makes an important connection between style and creative nonfiction in *Style as Argument* in which he analyzes works by Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and Joan Didion to defend his claim that “[o]ur experience reading contemporary nonfiction is an experience of style,” style for him meaning the rhythms and textures of language use (1987, p. 1). If reading nonfiction prose is “an experience of style,” then we can assume 1) that students have much to learn from studying the styles of published creative nonfiction writers and 2) that writing creative nonfiction can also be “an experience of style” since writing precedes reading. Yet style instruction is not being privileged or even much explored in creative nonfiction pedagogy if the content of the technique-driven craft essays students encounter in popular textbooks is any indication.

What I’m proposing is a pedagogy through which students learn to analyze “the deployment of rhetorical resources, in written discourse, to create and express meaning” (Butler, 2008, p. 3) in order to demystify the pleasurable aesthetic qualities or “literariness” of creative nonfiction at the sentence level, give students a rhetorical vocabulary to discuss works in progress, and help students develop their writerly voices in an effort to bridge the gap between writers and various publics. The idea behind the approach is this: If writing students study published flash essays, literary journalism, memoirs, and other personally situated prose through a rhetorical lens, study “the use of written language features as habitual patterns, rhetorical options, and conscious choices at the sentence and word level” in those writings (Butler, 2008, p. 3), and study how audiences receive and discuss the writings, then those students just might be able to learn through this mimetic, analytic process to make similar or better moves in their writings, for their audiences, for their purposes.

Those who write in literary genres, just like any other language users, have the capacity to improve and have the agency to affect diverse audiences, to move people to action if they so choose. In undergraduate creative nonfiction themed courses, a pedagogy grounded in rhetorical theory with an emphasis on style

can aid students in recognizing and using that agency. My fall 2010 advanced composition students, whose writings and reflections I will discuss later in this chapter, are a testament to the possibilities of this style pedagogy. But before bringing their voices into the conversation, I first need to shed some light on the ways style is currently discussed in creative nonfiction craft essays.

REPRESENTATIONS OF STYLE

Style is either something we name but do not value or value but cannot name.

— Star Medzerian, 187

In *Out of Style* Paul Butler briefly discusses the renewed interest that a growing contingent of compositionists has in personal writing. He notes that this interest “is imbued with the study of style, even though it is not acknowledged or recognized in that way” (2008, p. 107). I agree with this assertion as well as his observation that:

[t]he dispersion of style into personal writing suggests that style, while manifested locally in sentences, has important impacts on the broader form of discourse. It seems that the attention to ... creative nonfiction in composition is focused primarily at that broader level. What is clear, however, is that those features of the broader form of discourse ... become most important through the stylistic features enacted in sentences. (Butler, 2008, pp. 107-108)

To say this another way: compositionists who publish scholarship on creative nonfiction tend to conflate sentence-level style with form when discussing the various genres like the personal essay, memoir, or literary journalism. We ask, what are essayistic forms capable of that other forms are not? How and why do we teach students to write in these forms? We focus on the importance of expression, reflection, introspection, uncertainty, and exploration, and we weigh the pros and cons of the writing’s self-centeredness versus its usefulness. This deliberation is relevant and necessary to our scholarship, and even though I may be critical of the way those who identify themselves as creative writers discuss issues of style, let me state for the record that I am equally critical of those discussions (and lack thereof) in composition studies.

Most any writing class with a focus on types of creative nonfiction like the essay, memoir, or literary journalism spend a fair amount of time on the important issues of genre definitions, memory, truth representation, narrative construction, public exposure of private details, broad characteristics of various essay forms—the usual suspects. Those technique and concept-related topics are covered in most craft sections of creative nonfiction textbooks and in the creative nonfiction craft articles that appear in prominent magazines like *The Writer's Chronicle*. Yet, anthologized creative nonfiction craft essays rarely emphasize the sentence level where meaning is made (or obscured). Stylistic terminology becomes conflated with impressionistic, inadequately-defined concepts like “voice”⁴ and “authenticity.” My initial familiarity with those terms comes from my years as a creative writing undergraduate and master's student when I never thought to problematize their meanings. My essays apparently displayed these qualities, and, therefore, I was labeled a talented writer. While the part of me that remembers this culture of genius quite well can see the appeal of using such terms in order to maintain the institutional-conventional wisdom, the part of me that thinks writing can be taught, the rhetoric and composition teacher-scholar part, insists that there's a better way to learn about style. That way is linked to how well students understand style from a rhetorical standpoint.

In the fall of 2009, I had a critical encounter with a creative nonfiction craft article that, at first, bothered me because the title invoked authenticity, a concept I do not buy into. I opened up my new copy of *The Writer's Chronicle* to Sebastian Matthews's article “Stepping Through the Threshold: Ways to Achieve Authentic Voice in Memoir,” read it from a rhetorical perspective, and didn't quite know what to make of the advice. The strategies he explains to his audience were largely helpful—

Strategy 1: Create an occasion for speech

Strategy 2: Speak through the mask of the first person “I”

Strategy 3: Engage history

Strategy 4: Become your project

Strategy 5: Ground in place and time

Strategy 6: Separate character from narrator

Strategy 7: Imagine a listener for your story

(Matthews, 2009, pp. 72-80)

—but I found them unsettling because of the purported end result: authentic voice. While I think, as Enos does, that a personal *ethos* can emerge through

one's stylistic choices, I have a hard time believing that a self-constructed written version of oneself can *be* absolutely true or authentic. At best a voice can only *seem* true or authentic based on how a writer chooses to arrange and word his sentences within the context of the topic and the form of the piece. So when I look at that list, especially strategies 1, 2, 3, 5, and 7, my mind immediately goes to rhetorical situation. Who am I writing for and why? How do I want them to respond? How will I situate myself for that intended effect? What historical and cultural contexts am I working within? Am I responding to an opportune moment? These questions sync up with many of Matthews' "authentic voice" (*ethos*) building strategies; therefore, this illustrates one way that rhetoric can be applied to the teaching of creative nonfiction. Matthews may not be using rhetorical terminology, but he is still talking about craft in a way that could be construed as rhetorical, especially if the end result from taking his sage advice would be similar regardless of how the strategies are worded.

Likewise, the creative nonfiction textbooks I'm analyzing here—*Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: I & Eye*, *Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of Creative Nonfiction*, 5th edition, and *Creating Nonfiction: A Guide and Anthology*—contain many writings on craft that at times use a parallel discourse with rhetoric and composition theory and practice to describe certain conventions writers of creative nonfiction might follow. And in most of these texts, the fact that writers use accessible language to discuss strategies that ultimately can help writers plan writing projects and build *ethos* works well because anthologized essayists are some of the best writers of our time. They're engaging. They create identification with their readers through their use of psychic distance, a concept Erik Ellis thoughtfully explores in this collection. However, these positive qualities become somewhat irrelevant when published creative writers write rather ambiguously therefore unhelpfully about what I have been referring to throughout as style. The writers I discuss in the upcoming sections address macro level writing issues but rarely touch on the sentence level where style-talk would be valuable. I've grouped their depictions of style into three categories—style as genre, style as magic, and style as voice—based both on the ways that the term "style" is used as well as how concepts related to style are described. Closer examination of these depictions illuminate the need for a more direct, pragmatic approach to the explanation of style in creative nonfiction.

STYLE AS GENRE

Lee Gutkind is the only writer in *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: I & Eye* to use the word "style" in a craft context. In "The Creative Nonfiction Police" he says, "Of course, I am a creative nonfiction writer, 'creative' being indicative

of the style in which the nonfiction is written so as to make it more dramatic and compelling” (Gutkind, 2004, p. 349). Here “creative” differentiates the “style” of writing Gutkind does from other “styles” of nonfiction. “Style” could be changed to the word “technique” or “method” or “way,” and the sentence would maintain a very similar meaning. “Genre” might be the most precise word to show the relationship between “creative” and “nonfiction,” and that appears to be what he’s getting at, his own approach of taxonomizing creative nonfiction by naming its attributes: “dramatic and compelling,” what other “styles” of nonfiction are not.

Style does indeed play a large role in making any piece of writing dramatic and compelling, boring and pedantic, or somewhere in between. If a writer learns how to analyze the stylistic decisions her favorite author makes at a sentence level and gains a vocabulary to articulate that analysis, she can then imitate these and integrate them into her compositions if she so chooses. When Gutkind continues in his article, saying that “[w]e embrace many of the techniques of the fiction writer, including dialog, description, plot, intimacy of detail, characterization, point of view” a reader would learn what is possible in creative nonfiction—an important lesson—but that reader would not learn about style in the rhetorical sense, which, to me, is every bit as vital to their later success as a writer.

STYLE AS MAGIC

This next set of style depictions seem impractical as style depictions, no matter how beautifully they’re written, simply because a student would not likely be able to glean stylistic lessons from them. Craft essays are meant to serve at least a partially pragmatic purpose. When André Aciman explains “I write to give my life a form, a narrative, a chronology; and, for good measure, I seal loose ends with cadenced prose and add glitter where I know things were quite lusterless,” I know that he’s talking about style after the semicolon, but he doesn’t *teach* readers anything concrete about style (Aciman, 2005, p. 134).⁵ What does he really mean when he says “seal loose ends with cadenced prose”? How does he do that? And how does he go about “add[ing] glitter”? What constitutes glitter? Don’t get me wrong, I enjoy reading his impressionistic imagery, and I suppose I could ascertain suitable answers to these questions by stylistically analyzing his craft essay, “A Literary Pilgrim Progresses to the Past.” That seems to defeat the point of a craft essay, though.

Style theorist Winston Weathers would likely agree. In “Grammars of Style: New Options for Composition,” Weathers essentially explains the style of creative nonfiction as “Grammar B,” an alternative discourse with the

“characteristics of variegation, synchronicity, discontinuity, ambiguity, and the like” (2010, p. 221). He might tell Aciman that one who writes using Grammar B “must still be concerned with a rationale for his composition, a rationale that informs the composition, if not with ‘order and sense,’ then certainly with ‘interest and effectiveness’ in a kind of drama imperative” (2010, p. 237). However, we have no way of knowing Aciman’s writing rationale unless he shares this with us more explicitly.

Another example of style-talk in a magical context comes from Cynthia Ozick’s craft essay “She: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body.” Ozick’s title informs readers that they will be gaining greater insight about the essay form through an extended metaphor of the body, so I anticipate this move. She writes that “the essay is by and large a serene or melancholic form. It mimics that low electric hum, which sometimes rises to resemble actual speech, that all human beings carry inside their heads—a vibration, garrulous if somewhat indistinct, that never leaves us while we are awake” (Ozick, 2005, p. 204). This description, housed in a loose, complex, interrupted sentence, leaves readers with a poetic impression of style. I read the sentence, let it wash over me, and try to recreate the metaphor in my mind. Style as a “low electric hum.” For those who think best in abstractions, this might be a fruitful way to understand style, as something intangible and just out of reach. I can appreciate that point of view for having once lived it, but I’m now convinced that rhetoric offers us a better way. Students don’t have to be content to cull a concrete lesson from an impressionistic stylistic description that tells them the lyric essay “is held together by the glue of absence, the mortar of melody, the threnody of unspent inspiration” (Kitchen, 2009, p. 366). Instead, after gaining a stylistic vocabulary from completing style activities in class or from studying a book like Holcomb and Killingsworth’s *Performing Prose: The Study and Practice of Style in Composition*, they could appreciate Judith Kitchen’s lyrical sentence as one that expertly showcases the use of anaphora, asyndeton, and balance. Then they could write their own sentences that exhibit similar qualities. Through this inventive process, some may stumble upon ideas for future essays in which they can use their Kitchen-inspired sentences.

STYLE AS VOICE

As is true in Matthews’s article explaining techniques to achieve authentic voice in memoir, when other published craft writers discuss “voice” or the production of “sound” in creative nonfiction writing, I find that they come closest to describing style (or at least a concept directly connected to aspects of style) in concrete terms that student writers might be able to find useful. For

example, In “The Singular First Person,” a craft essay in which Scott Russell Sanders analyzes the rhetorical effectiveness of prominent essayists without using rhetorical terminology, he explains, “[o]nce you have heard [Wendell Berry’s] stately, moralizing, cherishing voice, laced through with references to the land, you will not mistake it for anyone else’s. Berry’s themes are profound and arresting ones. But it is his voice, more than anything he speaks about, that either seizes us or drives us away” (Sanders, 2004, p. 79). From this, we learn possible characteristics of what voice/style can be—“stately, moralizing, cherishing”—and we learn possible options for what voice/style can do—“seiz[e] us or driv[e] us away.” If a student read Sanders’s essay in tandem with Berry’s “The Long-Legged House,” that student could gain a deeper understanding of the effects of Berry’s style choices. This knowledge, in turn, could prove generative when the student sits down to invent or draft a nature-themed essay of his own even though Sanders does not demystify style at the sentence level.

Voice also features prominently in Steven Harvey’s “The Art of Self,” located along with Sanders’s piece in *The Fourth Genre* textbook. Harvey’s use of “voice” could be directly substituted with either “style” or “discourse,” as it is discussed here: “Each of us has many voices—the voice for a friend, a colleague, a student, a lover—and each voice is different. Personal essayists . . . must constantly adjudicate the voices in their hearts and choose the right language” (Harvey, 2009, p. 345). This process of judging and choosing the best voice for a particular essay is a key part of what he refers to as “shaping” or “fashion[ing] a text,” the way in which an “artist creat[es] a surrogate self” in writing (Harvey, 2009, p. 344). By acknowledging the conscious language decisions one must make in order to put the most relevant and appropriate version of oneself forward in a piece of personal writing, Harvey implies the rhetoricity of the process even as he denies the importance of audience concerns. Even though his article discusses style on an impressionistic level without many specific helpful examples, he does manage to quickly yet eloquently combat the idea of an unfiltered creative voice.

The strong connection between voice and *ethos* development is undeniable even in the most impressionistic descriptions, like Aciman’s “cadenced prose” critiqued above or Vivian Gornick’s description of George Orwell’s “persona” as “something genuine that he pulled from himself, and then shaped to his writer’s purpose” (2004, p. 139). Enos explains that from antiquity to modern times, the perception of “voice” in rhetoric has moved from that which presented the truth to an audience to that which can facilitate “the acceptance of belief” (1994, p. 187). Looking at voice in this historical context, we can call pure authenticity into question, but that doesn’t mean voice itself is a defunct concept. The facilitation of belief for an audience comes from an *ethos*-generating

voice. Enos notes that “ethos cannot be separated from audience consideration because part of the ethical appeal is one’s stance, a textual manifestation of an attitude and what Aristotle calls goodwill, the benevolent attitude of the writer toward readers” (1994, p. 188). A writer does not need to have the primary goal of persuasion in mind for this benevolent *ethos* to yield advantageous results; Rosanne Carlo effectively argues this point in her chapter “Jim Corder’s Generative Ethos as Alternative to Traditional Argument.” Indeed, voice, which emerges from stylistic choices, as Enos demonstrates via a stylistic analysis of Jim Corder’s personal essayistic prose in her article, can allow a writer to engage in “dialogic action, where both writer and reader are aware of, and enjoy, the engagement” (1994, p. 194).

This type of voice/style-privileging composition can indeed facilitate a powerful identification that, in turn, can create the potential for certain audiences to respond favorably to the writing at hand. Such a move in the way we talk about the development of voice would broaden its scope in both composition and creative writing. As Mayers explains:

“Voice” ... might be viewed not as the enactment in language of unique self-qualities or an individual’s artistic vision, but rather as a rhetorical device developed through conscious or unconscious absorption of, or resistance to, other such rhetorical devices. “Finding one’s voice,” then—the dream of many dedicated students of creative writing—may be a rhetorical rather than a spiritual exercise. (2005, p. 120)

With a toolbox of, as T. R. Johnson calls them, “renegade” rhetorical and stylistic devices in tow—“concrete strategies” that incite a “highly pleasurable practice in which selves, texts, and worlds are experienced as dynamic, interanimating processes”—students can control their muses instead of letting their muses control them (2003, p. 344).

I’m still critical of voice-talk in creative nonfiction craft essays, though, because of the instances when writers insinuate or unproblematically explain a process by which words flow freely from a true self onto the page, thereby upholding what Louis T. Milic refers to as “psychological monism, which finds its most common expression in the aphorism that the style is the man,” a theory that has long since been rejected by contemporary style theorists (1965, p. 67). One of my favorite pieces of recent craft writing to share with students is the “Style” chapter in Becky Bradbury and Doug Hesse’s *Creating Nonfiction* textbook because of the numerous helpful examples and analyses they share of

interesting punctuation usage, sentence rhythm, repetition, and point of view; however, I pause every time I read the following excerpt from the chapter:

Whatever the mode, whatever we create, our style expresses who we are at that moment in time. While we can't avoid being aware of an audience (the reader, the viewer, the judge), we need to try to push that observer out of our mind's eye while we are working. (2009, p. 78)

Part of me wonders if that passage promoting writer-based prose is included in the chapter as a nod to dominant creative writing ideology before offering suggestions on ways for students to vary their style even though that seems to directly contradict the sentiment that “our style expresses who we are at that moment in time.” I shouldn't speculate, though. Even in this collection, Ellis, who also claims a creative writing background, argues that “language can be rhetorically fitting regardless of how well it matches audience expectations.” I will, however, fundamentally disagree that style choices should be made to please the writer above all others because that is not a sustainable practice, and I disagree even more so with the idea that it is a helpful pedagogical strategy to both purport self expression and teach methods of stylistic improvement due to the incongruence of these ideas. As Milic warned us in 1965, “the monistic view of style ... cannot be allowed to infect the teaching of our subject, for it vitiates all the available pedagogical resources of rhetoric” (1965, p. 126). From my experience, it seems that students come into introductory creative nonfiction themed classes—likely more often than they come into a “less creative” composition class—with something like a monistic mindset, determined that the point is to produce expressive writing for the self instead of personally-situated writing for an audience or at least as some blend of expression and rhetoricity. There's nothing inherently wrong with either point of view, but the distinction between them is one upon which so much depends, especially for “non-genius” students who have the most to gain from writing instruction.

STYLE PEDAGOGY IN ACTION

In the first week of my Fall 2010 Advanced Composition class, I asked my students in a short writing assignment to define style as a reaction to how published writers have defined style, prior to our first class discussion on the issue. They read the Bradbury and Hesse chapter as well as Milic's “Theories of Style and Their Implications for the Teaching of Composition,” Weathers's

“Grammars of Style” cited earlier, and an excerpt on style from Book III of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. What Dawn, one of the students, wrote in response to Milic’s explanations of psychological monism and rhetorical dualism⁶ highlights the dominant response of her classmates as well, over half being creative writing majors or minors like her and the rest a mix from other majors:

A definition of style that I am comfortable with would be finding the way with syntax, tone, and word choice. It’s the voice that readers hear when they read the work written on the page. The voice will change depending on how the writing develops, but like a personality, the voice is always there ...

I believe that good writing is something that cannot be taught but is something that is inherent. We are either good writers or we are not cut out from the correct cloth to be a writer. There are no workshops that can teach a bad writer to become a better writer nor are there books that can be written to mold someone. (Dawn, Short Assignment #2)

Just as many of the aforementioned craft writers demonstrated, Dawn too is able to eloquently articulate the possibility that someone can both be born a good writer and somehow “[find] the way with syntax, tone, and word choice.” You either have the gift and know what sounds best or you don’t have the gift and, therefore, should not pursue a future in writing. It should come as no surprise that I encountered a fair amount of resistance when I started to play the audience card, made connections between rhetoric and creative nonfiction, and asked them to write in “voices” not their own.

I’m going to focus here on how I framed style for my students in the first weeks of the semester, as that framing provided the foundation for all of the style work and essay composing they did throughout the course. In order to maintain the dual objectives of teaching the basic tenets of creative nonfiction and sentence-level style from a rhetorical standpoint, I started lightly with the “what is creative nonfiction” talk under the assumption that we could create a dynamic list of sometimes contradictory characteristics as a class throughout the semester (which we did). We spent a week on recognizing and practicing the different sentence types (fragment, simple, compound, complex, compound-complex) in class, which proved to be no easy task even for writers at an advanced level. Simple sentences can at times be quite long through the connection of many prepositional phrases and complex sentences can be quite short so long

as a dependent and independent clause exists; that is a lot for a student to wrap their mind around if they haven't had much formal grammar instruction. These lessons on sentence types became reinforced as students completed a series of copy and compose exercises for homework.

Copy and compose is a style activity created by Winston Weathers and described in his 1969 book *Copy and Compose: A Guide to Prose Style*. Students are asked to copy a sentence by hand (my students type their sentences if that is their preferred method) and then compose a sentence of similar length and structure. Copy and compose practice gave students a chance to imitate with the intent to internalize common grammatical structures and rhetorical schemes found in some of the flash essays they had been reading from the anthology *Short Takes: Brief Encounters with Contemporary Nonfiction* and the online journal *Brevity: A Journal of Concise Literary Nonfiction*. They also worked in groups to count the number of each sentence type in some of those under 1,000 word essays. All of this was in preparation for their first assignment: 1) to conduct and write a stylistic analysis of a published flash essay of their choosing that looks specifically at how both sentence and essay-level choices come together to work well in the piece as a whole, and 2) to write their own flash essay about a place of personal significance that imitates the sentence and essay-level style (but not the content or overall theme) of the essay they analyzed.

Because students analyzed and wrote only flash nonfiction pieces in this first five-week unit, they were able to concentrate their efforts on interpretation of published writing, on form and language quality, and on the calculated transformation of their voices, instead of lengthy text production. Hans Ostrom had a similar experience when he asked his fiction students to engage in an imitation of microstories. He explains that “students are invited by a particular text to manipulate language in a similar way” and it is partially this conscious shift in positionality and the resulting emphasis on language choices that makes the activity such a fruitful one (1998, p. 168). In my class, asking students to focus on places significant to them—topics they know intimately in most cases—allowed me to maintain a location-based class thematically, moving from personal spaces to community spaces to publication spaces over the semester, but spend a significant amount of time on style in the first unit.

In a reflection piece written directly after his submission of Unit 1 essays, Larry, another student, said:

[n]ot only has [the study of style] helped me to understand how others package and deliver meaning to the readers, but it has given me the ability to put this understanding to immediate and practical use. My writing in other classes has been

dramatically improved. (L., Process Comment on Imitation Assignment)

I agreed with this assessment even within the context of the relatively few weeks that I had gotten to know his work because he initially did not vary his sentence constructions very often or develop details in his writing beyond basic descriptions. Because of his background in journalism, he had a tendency to pack as much information as quickly as possible into his prose. But then he turned in his flash essay about his visit to a slave house in Senegal, imitating Salman Rushdie's "Water's Edge." In the essay he's standing in a room in the *Maison des Esclaves* "designed to break the spirit and weaken the mind" of America-bound African slaves. Of this space he writes, in part,

Because these places were devised to physically, emotionally and psychologically prepare the captives for the harsh, inhumane conditions in the ship's cargo bay, they were purposefully designed to be cramped in space, barely tolerable in comfort with very little to no light. At the rear of the house, there was a single door of ominous foreboding. Slaves going through this portal knew it to be their last in Africa. Not a single person who passed through this door returned to their homeland, hence the proverbial name—The door of no return. (L., "Maison Des Esclaves.")

Rushdie dwells on the details in "Water's Edge" with long complex sentences mimicking the motions described like

[b]efore that first creature drew that first breath there would have been other moments when other creatures made the same attempt and fell fainting back into the waves or else suffocated, flopping fishily from side to side, on the same seashore and another, and another. (2005, p. 65)

So Larry had to make similar moves in order to write a successful imitation. Although the writing is not in what Larry might consider to be his own voice, he was obviously still happy with the end result, and so was I.

Not everyone had such a positive experience. Nicole, another student, immediately noted at the end of the unit that "[o]verall, I am glad we did this assignment so I can incorporate some of [Ann] Daum's stylistic devices into my writing, but I am looking forward to having my own voice again." (N., Process

Comment on Imitation Assignment). Daum's tone in "Those Who Stay and Those Who Go" is, as Nicole describes, "stoic," but Nicole picked a funny place of significance to write about: her British grandmother's favorite Applebee's. During the revision process, Nicole struggled to transform her lively prose into something quiet and contemplative. In her case, the rough drafts were decidedly better than what she submitted as her final because in each subsequent draft the divide between form and content grew wider. Like lines delivered from a poorly cast actor, the style from which her voice emerged created an ill-fitting *ethos* for the topic at hand. She learned an important lesson from the process, though: She should have picked a David Sedaris essay to imitate.

I walked away from this unit with some lessons learned as well. Perhaps one of the most surprising is that when students understand the rhetorical effects of certain schemes like asyndeton and polysyndeton—speeding up or slowing down a sentence, respectively—they will start using those schemes all of the time—even in pass/fail short writing assignments—to achieve those effects, and their writing as a whole becomes more enjoyable to read (the exception being those who use the figures ad nauseum). Many students feared the fragment at the beginning of the semester, claiming that it would hurt their *ethos* due to its ungrammaticality. That is, until they realized many essayists use fragments quite often to achieve writing that sounds more like the way people talk. Or think.

I also wanted to see if some relevant claims made recently by contemporary style scholars manifested themselves in practice. For instance Butler asserts that "memory can be recalled, and focused, through stylistic resources" (2008, p. 148). I used this idea to inform how I introduced copy and compose, asking students to hold their places of personal significance firmly in mind when they created their sentences. Many of the sentences found a way into their prose, sometimes exactly, sometimes in altered form. One student even created an outline for their essay from their copy and compose sentences and built around those sentences to compose their rough draft. Likewise, I found what Medzerian argues in "Style and the Pedagogy of Response" to ring true to me, that "[t]o adequately articulate our expectations to students through our commentary, we must use language that is text-specific and that treats student writing as comprised of conscious choices" (2010, p. 191). I found that I was able to engage with student texts at a deeper analytical level than I had been able to in the past and my students were able to understand my commentary and critiques because we shared the common language of style.

In the units that followed, the spatial elements of my pedagogy became more prominent: My students became new journalists, researching by immersing themselves in local spaces outside their comfort zones, and finally they became publication-seeking writers, locating spaces for their work and creating pieces

appropriate for the rhetorical situations of those spaces. With an understanding of style, and using sentence-level stylistic analysis as a revision exercise, the majority of my students were able to meet these challenges and at times exceed my and their own wildest expectations. For her final project, Dawn created a deeply personal blog that documented her ongoing battle with postpartum depression, and she shared it with other women online dealing with similar issues. Larry wrote a series of flash essays with the goal of “shin[ing] a flashlight on the Dark Continent so [his] readers can see the cultural diversity and fascinating curiosities that can be discovered in Africa,” and he won a creative writing scholarship with one of those essays the following semester (L., “Final Exam Essay”). Nicole created the “Ubuntu Memoir Project,” on tumblr.com, the “story of [her] life and who [she] is told through the stories of other people. An autobiography of biographies” with the purpose of “showing the world that we, as people, have such a great influence on one another, that we should use that influence for good” (N., “Ubuntu Memoir Project”).

Starting with style, my students were able to see the importance of language in terms of audience, and by the end of the course the majority of them were not producing merely self-expressive writing. They were producing effectively self-situated writing with voices that did not say “me, me, me” but “look at this injustice I’ve seen and want to do something about” or “look at what I’ve done and learned in my life that I can share with you so you can learn something and do something in the world.” Voices that “seek identification without sacrificing conviction.” Maybe my fall 2010 class was an anomaly and I will never again feel the palpable energy of a group of writers creating something bigger than the sum of their parts, but I will strive to regenerate that energy in every class I teach.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The growing popularity of creative nonfiction is undeniable. Creative nonfiction may not be central to English studies, but it does stand at the nexus of creative writing, composition, and literature because it is increasingly studied (and sometimes produced) in all three. According to the AWP Guide to Writing Programs, as of March 2012, 127 MFA programs offer concentrations in creative nonfiction—a significant rise from the thirty-five that Hesse reported from the same guide in 1999 (2003, pp. 252). This seems to imply that more students are becoming interested in writing fact-based prose that privileges narrative, personal situatedness, and a literary style, which also means that more students are reading and appreciating this type of writing. If students are demanding

more courses in creative nonfiction, a variety of effective pedagogical options should be available for those who are called upon to teach it. I've offered style pedagogy as one such option.

If style's reemergence into composition theory and practice takes hold, which I sincerely hope it does, then style should logically emerge in creative nonfiction as well in ways that highlight the rhetorical effects of stylistic decisions. Writing in the various genres of creative nonfiction, after all, thrives on sentences that *sound* authentic, like a human voice speaking. When students, especially at the undergraduate level, understand how to analyze, imitate, and successfully employ the devices utilized by their favorite writers in ways that position those students as writers who could be published, as writers who can imbue prose with the rhythms and figures of "creative" writing, they also realize that they don't have to be literary geniuses to produce polished, engaging essays. Composing this way is not magic, despite how it might feel.

NOTES

1. Like many who teach this type of writing, I do not particularly like the term "creative nonfiction," a term that defines the genre by what it is not and accomplishes little beyond securing its province in creative writing instead of composition. I use it, though, because "creative nonfiction" is currently the dominant way to describe fact-based prose that privileges narrative, personal situatedness, and literary style. Also, I see the writing process is an inventive, creative process, regardless of the end result, so I reject the idea that some writing is inherently creative while other types are not.
2. A notable recent exception to this, which I read long after I designed the class described herein, is Emily Brisse's "The Geography of Sentences" published in the March/April 2012 *Writer's Chronicle*.
3. Dennis Rygiel first made an argument similar to this in his 1989 "Stylistics and the Study of Twentieth-Century Literary Nonfiction." In this article Rygiel argues for students to use a practical stylistic form of analysis, one that "derives its aim of systematic description of language use" rather than impressionistic description when analyzing nonfiction prose (30). He models this approach through an analysis of two E. B. White essays and notes that his students routinely made the comment that they improved as writers after studying stylistics. I see myself building on Rygiel's pedagogical ideas using style theories from Enos, Winston Weathers, Paul Butler, T. R. Johnson, and others.
4. For more on the composition/creative writing split that landed creative nonfiction more dominantly in creative writing programs than in composition ones, see Douglas Hesse's "Who Owns Creative Nonfiction?"

5. I subscribe to Enos's definition of voice as that which emerges from style and has the potential to create a transformative ethos; however, this definition comes from rhetorical scholarship and is not used in creative writing craft texts where the idea of "voice" is generally shrouded in ambiguity. See Bizzaro and McClanahan's "Putting Wings on the Invisible: Voice, Authorship, and the Authentic Self" for a historical recounting of the perception of authentic self and voice in creative writing and composition since the late 1960s.
6. As a reader of this essay in the context of the anthology *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: I & Eye*, I do not know for certain whether Aciman's primary purpose was to write a craft article or something else perhaps more lyrical or exploratory. However, because his essay has been placed with other craft articles, I make certain assumptions about the sort of demystifying information the writer is expected to divulge.
7. Milic explains that the view of rhetorical dualism "has always implied that ideas exist wordlessly and can be dressed in a variety of outfits, depending on the need for the occasion" (1965, p. 67).

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