

CHAPTER 4: IMITATION AS MEDITATION

Those who do not want to imitate anything, produce nothing.

-Salvador Dali

On the first day of my first undergraduate creative writing class, I sat in the back of the room and listened to the whispered anticipation and fear from those who would soon be my writing-competitors, as we waited for our famous poet-teacher to make her first appearance. When she finally walked in, we all stared, rapt as this surprisingly small woman crossed to the front of the classroom and began to pace before the board.

Over the next fifteen weeks, she gave us sentences from her favorite novels to write from; she played opera sung by her favorite soprano and cried while we listened; she talked of inspiration and voice and of the silencing and oppressive acts of the white man and of popular culture; she said that the things we love—music, writing, people—have heartbeats that jive with our own; she quoted James Whitmore saying, “I’m not qualified to teach you, but I can pass on to you what I’ve learned”; and she gave me an “ok” on my in-class writings with no other comments until my final project—a collection of poems—on which she wrote “Fantastic! A” with no other margin or end comments.

There were at least a couple of exceptions in my studies (e.g., a creative non-fiction professor in my MA program who commented at length and at different stages of the writing process on my work), but for the most part, I found that my creative writing courses all went the same way: the teachers told us about the ideas/images/music, etc., that inspired them; they gave us examples of good creative writing; and they commented very little, if at all, on the content of our works. No doubt, there are many other exceptions to the course I’ve just described. After my coursework as a creative writing student, however, I was left wondering if my experience in receiving little in the way of written feedback was a too-common practice in such courses. I have never found a definitive answer, but the question stayed with me, as I went on to become a writing teacher and a writing program administrator.

When I first served as an English department’s composition director and read the instructors’ comments to the personal essays that some assigned in their first-year writing courses, I saw much less commenting on those papers than I did on others—a problem I attributed, at the time, to composition teachers not

knowing the genre well enough to make substantial comments. However, even now, when I serve with creative writing professors on creative-writing-focused thesis committees, I find that even their comments on content are broad and sparse and that, at some point, the question of the student's talent (the presumably innate capacity to write well) comes up.

Again, this is not to suggest that all teachers of creative nonfiction neglect offering extensive feedback to their students' works. Such an assertion seems ludicrous. Rather, I'm more interested in common practices—in students' more typical experiences in such courses. This is also not to suggest that teachers of creative nonfiction, even those who don't offer much in the way of written comments, don't know how to teach writing. On the contrary, my first creative writing teacher and her stories about what personally inspired her got me to pay more attention—e.g., to what inspired me, to what seemed to evoke emotion in others, to how the trivial might serve as a powerful metaphor for the immense, and to how being moved felt better than any other experience I'd known. On the other hand, after four years of study and practice in creative nonfiction, I still had no articulable way of describing what my writing was like and really only knew intuitively what worked and what didn't work in my writing. All I knew for sure was that for some reason that generally had something to do with my passion or my voice or my style—compliments that I appreciated but only vaguely understood—a few creative writing teachers liked my personal essays.

I've seen evidence of the same in my creative nonfiction students' experiences, too, and across three different universities where I have worked. For example, today, in an online class discussion forum within an introductory-level personal essay course, a student shared with the class the fact that though her writing teachers talked about her voice in her creative and personal writings in grade school, she never actually saw "voice" defined. At least a handful of her classmates agreed, saying they had the same experience. I asked the group to explain how they understood their prior teachers' comments on voice, and I got a variety of answers—from "the teacher was talking about my personality" to "the teacher liked my writing style" and so on. All agreed that, really, they didn't have a clear sense of what the comments meant.

This confusion and lack of specificity does not seem to occur only in regard to comments about voice. In my Ph.D. program, when I was teaching a course on the personal essay, I had a student who had been writing personal essays for several years and sharing them with various audiences. She'd generally gotten positive responses to her work, as readers consistently told her that her writing seemed "smart" and "different." After we read her first essay in class, I jokingly called her "The Metaphor Queen," and in response she exclaimed, "That's it! That's what they mean! No one ever put it like that before." In what was for me

an alarming moment, it became clear that no one had ever told her that what made her personal essays smart and surprising—and at times, confusing and unwieldy—was her prolific use of metaphor. Unfortunately, I could easily recount many similar examples of students not being able to identify the tendencies, habits, strengths, and weaknesses in their creative nonfiction writing.

This probably seems, at first, odd (it did to me). One might think that in my own case and in my students', perhaps we'd had poor or sloppy readers in the past. But, it seems to me that we had very good readers—good, at least, at encouraging us to continue writing, and perhaps that is the point. This suggests, though, one of two (if not both of the following) assumptions: 1. students will become stronger creative nonfiction writers simply by writing frequently; and 2. creative nonfiction writing doesn't need much written feedback.³³ Perhaps it's no surprise, but both of these assumptions align perfectly with Elbow's early work on voice. In *Writing with Power*, Elbow says that he had his students write "15 pages a week" and admits that he read their work "quickly and intermittently" (282), commenting very little on each piece. His purpose: to discover voice in writing. I often wonder how thoroughly creative nonfiction teachers have inherited and come to practice the same, and with the same purpose in mind.³⁴

When I consider my own and my students' experiences, I wonder how many of our teachers were responding to our texts as if they were extensions of our selves (e.g., in the claim that my personal essays embodied my "passion"). If I'm right, if creative nonfiction teachers tend to see the essay as an expression of the writer's mind on the page, then perhaps that is why there is a lack of specificity in their comments. All the writer would need to learn to express his/her mind are more chances to do exactly that and maybe a little help with form and style to make that expression more powerful.

Again, if I'm right, then these assumptions and their attendant practices reflect, certainly, the version of subjectivity described in Chapter 1. However, they also work within the version of subjectivity described in Chapter 2, for even in an essay that takes seriously the concept of the self as a socially constructed entity, that entity's construction on the page is still believed to be a re-presentation of the self of the flesh and blood writer. In fact, as shown in Chapter 2, readers (like Pratt) make assumptions about and comment on the living writer based on the "evidence" about his/her life, experiences, thoughts, values, etc., that are articulated on the page. If one teaches essay writing within either version of subjectivity, then the essay becomes an exercise in discovering how to accurately and effectively express or re-present the self on the page.

Interestingly (when considered in relation to the sparse commenting creative nonfiction teachers often give), essay textbooks generally offer little, if any, instruction to help students do the work of re-presenting the self.³⁵ For example,

two well-received and popular essay textbooks are Robert L. Root and Michael Steinberg's *The Fourth Genre* and Phillip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay*. Both are anthologies in the strictest sense, with the first focusing on various subgenres of creative nonfiction and the second focusing specifically on the personal essay. Each text includes a rather lengthy introduction that makes some attempt at defining the genre, pointing out some of its conventions, and discussing what's interesting about the genre as well as what's difficult about it. Beyond the introduction, the only commentary from Lopate is in the biographies included before each text (again, suggesting that to read an essay one should know something of the writer); Root and Steinberg only include short (roughly a page and a half of text) introductions to the three major sections of the textbook. To my mind, the lack of instruction in anthologies and their prevalence suggest that students are expected to learn to write essays via imitation.

Though this is not necessarily explicitly explained in essay anthologies, the assumption seems to be that students learn to write successful essays by studying how the master essayists did it—not by studying the masters' writing processes, per se, but by examining the essays produced by these master essayists and exploring the ways in which they responded to the events/materials/people presented to them in their lives. I am reminded, for example, of the famous, small-statured writing teacher of my first creative writing course, who shared with us the pieces of music and literature that had inspired her to write some of her best works.

Of course, studying the masters' works in order to improve one's own work is, by no means, a new method for invention; its roots trace back more than two thousand years, and as a pedagogical method, it appears with great force (and contention) throughout the rhetorical tradition. That said, per the most common conception of subjectivity in the essay (articulated in the first chapter of this project), imitation seems, at first, to be an ill-suited strategy for essay writing. If the essay is an expression of the essential self of the essayist, then how does my imitation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's voice, for example, give me access to my own? Or, in the context of the socially constructed self, how would imitating his voice help me to construct my own—given that mine occurs in a vastly different context and would be constructed from vastly different social categories (e.g., female, academic, sister, etc.)? By extension, it also seems strange that there are few essay textbooks with exercises asking students to plumb their innerness or to examine their "constructedness" and to voice that innerness or constructedness in different kinds of ways. All of these points leave us with the question: why imitation? *How* is imitation supposed to get students access to the true self or the constructed self so that they can render this self on the page authentically?

Given my work in prior chapters to establish and explore connections be-

tween the essay (as a tradition, practice, and genre) to the scholarship and pedagogical insights of rhetoric and composition scholars and teachers, I will in this chapter explore the history of imitative pedagogy in the rhetorical tradition, as well as in composition pedagogy; in doing so, I will address, first, the seeming contradiction at work in a pedagogy (re)produced for a genre invested in and driven by the close relationship between the self-on-the-page and its unique writer.

IMITATION AS A PRACTICE OF HOMOGENIZATION

According to composition scholar Frank D'Angelo in his 1973 *College Composition and Communication* article "Imitation and Style," imitation should be understood as "the process whereby the writer participates not in stereotypes, but in archetypal forms and ideas" (283). This emphasis on "archetypal forms and ideas" should sound familiar to essay scholars and teachers, given that one of the emphases in discussions on the essay is its participation in universal truths, and in this emphasis, the pedagogical use of imitation certainly seems justified. For example, in Lopate's Introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, he states, "At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience. As Michel de Montaigne ... put it, 'Every man has within himself the entire human condition.' This meant that when he was telling about himself, he was talking, to some degree, about all of us" (xxiii). In this particular reading of Montaigne, one finds an Expressivist sentiment: that the individual's truths mirror everyone else's. The renowned rhetoric and composition scholar, James Berlin explains, "The underlying conviction of expressionists is that when individuals are spared the distorting effects of a repressive social order, their privately determined truths will correspond to the privately corresponding truths of all others" (486). It follows, then, that if the essay is the genuine, unfiltered, personal expression of the writer's self and his truths, which necessarily correspond to others' truths, then imitating Fitzgerald's essays may actually grant me access to my own truths.

One could easily get bogged down here in the dangerous assumption that my truth, for example, should correspond to that of an African American male who lived and wrote in the 1950s, or that it could correspond to that of a prepubescent female, one who lived in the 1980s in the former Soviet Union. Many scholars in Rhetoric and Composition have pointed to this danger in their scholarship (see Bizzell's description of "the turn to the social" in "Foundationalism and Anti-foundationalism"). As such, I think it's safe to assume that any writing teacher working today would hesitate to teach "universals" or "human nature." Too, in most contemporary personal essays (see, for example, Barbara Kingsolv-

er's "Household Words," Lawrence Gonzales's "Marion Prison," or Demetria Martinez's "Inherit the Earth" and "The Things They Carried"), essayists now do this "universalizing" not by actually speaking for the whole of humanity but by trying to speak to an issue that is bigger than his/her self. For example, in "Household Words," Kingsolver begins the essay with a story about her driving home one day and witnessing an assault. However, the essay quickly moves from her personal experience to the much larger issue of homelessness in America.

I could offer Kingsolver's essay to my students as an example of "how to speak to the bigger issues," and I think they would be receptive to reading it as such. However, given the three major conventions of the essay (see Chapter 1), if I were to ask them, then, to write an essay in which they must imitate the way Kingsolver structures her essay, they would, no doubt, find the exercise disingenuous—because it would prevent the student from producing a true essay, e.g., one that utilizes the freedom and "natural" way of expressing the writer's mind that is key to any essay. In the conception of the socially constructed self that I've explained in Chapter 2, given the importance of context, it seems counterintuitive to suggest that imitating Kingsolver's essay (which would constitute a form of contextualization) would provide an effective way of constructing their own self-on-the-page. Rather, it would be exceedingly easy to assume that in imitating another's way of re-presenting the self, one risks conformity and uniformity—two qualities that would be kryptonite to the power of the personal essay.

I see this assumption about imitation, as well as a more complex relationship to it, most clearly when discussing the institutionalization of Standard English with students. In such conversations, students often make this argument: in order to understand, to be understood—to be part of a discourse community—they must use a common language and common language conventions. No doubt, as I've shown in Chapter 1, the essay works in a similar way: for a text to be recognized as an essay, it must embody the conventions that constitute the genre. Inevitably, though, my students begin to get uncomfortable when terms like "diversity" and "homogeneity" are introduced in the same conversation. They, like many writing teachers, find an emphasis on imitating convention in any discourse and in any text to be suspect, if not counter-productive to the student's development as an autonomous thinker (and writer).

Common conceptions of imitation suggest that it is a homogenizing practice, which if carried to its end, would make us like a series of holograms—shadows of the same model, a kind of one-dimensional reflection of something/someone more substantial. In tracing a history of imitation in writing pedagogy, Bob Connors argues that the romanticism of the 1970s, in particular, is responsible for the devaluing, if not rejection, of the practices of imitation in the writing classroom. He states, "The romanticism of the age ... would grow more

and more potent as the 1970s segued into the 1980s. Teachers and theorists reacted against any form of practice that seemed to compromise originality and the expression of personal feelings, and imitation exercises were among the most obvious indoctrinations to ‘tradition’ and ‘the system’” (467). This indoctrination seemed to be the inevitable consequence of imitation exercises that were “context-stripped from what students really wanted to say themselves” (Connors 468). In other words, it was believed that the exercises made students automata—parrots, if you will, of the model text/author—instead of active learners and participants in a discourse, where what they intended to say should have been the most important factor in their learning and participation. Consequently, writing teachers, along with their writing students, became disenchanted with imitation exercises and talked, instead, about a learning process that many believed imitation exercises would not accommodate.

For example, in his book titled *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (1968), James Moffett states, “I would not ask a student to write anything other than an *authentic* discourse, because the learning process proceeds from intent and content down to the contemplation of technical points [the latter of which was taught through imitation exercises], not the other way” (205, emphasis added). The term “authentic,” when used to describe a writer’s work, typically suggests that the expression originates in and from the writer (from his/her intention), not from convention, and that the writer’s intentions, including his/her intended meaning, are most important—trumping, even, the writer’s skill and deployment of conventions in writing.

This conception of authentic writing, too, hinges on a belief that language is a transparent vehicle (driven by the writer, of course) for the expression of the writer (his/her mind and intentions) on the page—the very same concept of language explored at length in Chapter 1, in the conception of the essential self expressed on the page. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, the problems proliferate in this conception: it is to blame for the seeming risk one takes in using imitation to learn the essay, for example. Indeed, I only risk homogenization if language is, in fact, just a vehicle for the expression (or construction) of the self; only then does my imitation of Fitzgerald’s essay mean that I am, essentially, imitating his self on the page, re-presenting it as if it were my own.

However, though the use of imitation may have its problems within conceptions of the essential and the socially constructed self on the page, it provides writers with interesting and effective possibilities for studying and practicing the essay within the version of subjectivity described in Chapter 3. Thus, to put this really simply: there’s no need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. All we, as essay teachers, scholars, and writers need is a bit of reorientation to the practice, a reorientation that is ultimately a return to older uses of imitation.

A DIFFERENT CONCEPTION OF IMITATION

As has been argued and demonstrated at length in Chapter 3, any subject that is revealed on the page is not actually the same as that of the flesh-and-blood writer; rather, the two subjects work and are (re)constituted in relation to one another. Consequently, the use of imitation as part of an essay pedagogy shifts, for if the self on the page and the self of the writer are different subjects, constituted differently, then imitation does not enable the cloning effect that so many writers worry about; rather, variety is inevitable. To explain this seeming contradiction, I'll have to explain a very different concept of originality, first.

Unlike common conceptions of originality—that it stems from some unfiltered, untainted part (the essence) of a writer—the concept of originality for which I'd like to advocate is one where originality stems, instead, from a “happening” within a discourse. I, like William Gruber, would argue that there is no originality without the writer having “a defined area to work in” (497): namely, the feared and, consequently, avoided “tradition” or “system.” To carry this idea at least a few steps further, I'd argue that when students imitate, when they participate in the practices of imitation, they are not only discovering effective ways of essaying. They are, in fact, participating in discourse (or multiple discourses), establishing their work within contexts and traditions that give the work ground—both to root itself in and from which to push off. Though they may not be constructing an “authentic” discourse in the way Moffett means it (a discourse that originates in, from, and becomes the expression of the unique and autonomous subject that is the writer), they are ultimately participating in the constituting of a self in discourse—and not a self that is merely a carbon copy of some other self.

As I've shown in Chapter 3, one way that the Ancients (and Montaigne) worked to constitute a self in discourse was through the care of the self, of which the practices of self writing were a part. Within those self writing practices, the *hupomnēmata*, a category within which I have placed the essay, served as materials for meditation (easily the primary practice in self writing). In self writing, however, meditation does not involve plumbing one's innerness and reflecting on it. As Foucault states, “The intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for the purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self” (“Self Writing” 210-211). To put this simply, in the practices of self writing, writers collect what they've read, explore the connections and contradictions they see among the parts, and they try to piece them all together. They are not necessarily looking for some consistent truth, but they are considering relations, making sense of connections and

ruptures. We scholars already know this process, for we spend our days reading immense amounts of material, considering it, and in the meditative act of writing, we try to “make sense” of it: we try to thread it together in such a way that parts speak to/with each other like singers in a chorus.

Extending this metaphor a little further, the music produced in that chorus is a result of the process of “unification,” and according to Foucault, said unification occurs *in the self*. Foucault states, “But [unification] is not implemented in the art of composing an ensemble; it must be established in the writer himself, as a result of the *hypomnēmata*, of their construction (and hence in the very act of writing) and of their consultation (and hence in their reading and rereading)” (“Self Writing” 213). In order for unification to be established in the writer, Foucault argues, quoting Seneca (and, likely, Nietzsche), that we must “digest” the material, through the processes of reading and writing. In fact, Seneca goes so far as to say that “We should see to it that whatever we have absorbed should not be allowed to remain unchanged, or it will be not part of us. We must digest it” (qtd in Foucault “Self Writing” 213).

Here, one can see the fundamentally different conception of subjectivity at work in the care of the self and, hopefully, the radical change to conceptions of imitation and, thus, to originality: we do not simply encounter ideas, perspectives, and/or evidence and then force them into a discernable pattern or image, like a puzzle-master might; rather, we must “digest” material in order for it to become a part of us. Foucault states, “It is one’s own soul that must be constituted in what one writes; but, just as a man bears his natural resemblance to his ancestors on his face, so it is good that one can perceive the filiation of thoughts that are engraved *in* his soul” (“Self Writing” 214, emphasis added). Foucault does not say engraved “on” his soul; he says “in.” This distinction is important, for in it, one can see that the self is constituted in practices, e.g., of self writing, and that the self (or soul) that occurs at any moment is genealogical in nature; it is not essential, not socially-constructed, but inherited; it is the moment of absorption, of integration.

Foucault is not describing a self that is stable, pre-social, transcendent. He is not describing a self that is determined by distinct social categories, e.g. race, gender, sexuality, etc. He’s describing a self that is utterly historical and also momentary—a self that is constituted in practices in which writers can participate, but that do not originate in writers; a self that is the momentary collision of so many ideas, beliefs, perspectives, but is not the creator of all of those ideas, beliefs, perspectives; a self that is conditional, shifting, indefinite, and a product of the discourses that are already, always at work; a self that happens, that is a “happening,” within those discourses.

If we buy this different conception of the self, then the question that follows

is always about how the writer participates in his/her own constituting: how does s/he *do* anything, create anything? Where is originality in this relation? To answer these questions, in thinking about this process of constituting the self by reading and capturing-through-writing the already-said, I want to direct our attention to how one's thinking and writing are constituted in an encounter with a text, specifically when that text serves as a model to be imitated.

Take, for example, Seneca's metaphor of bees gathering honey:

We also, I say, ought to *copy* these bees, and sift whatever we have gathered from a varied course of reading [...]; then, by applying the supervising *care* with which our nature has endowed us [...], we should so blend those several flavours into one delicious compound that, even though it betrays its origin, yet it nevertheless is clearly *a different thing from that whence it came*. [...] We must digest [this material]; otherwise it will merely enter the memory and not the reasoning power. [...] This is what our mind should do: it should hide away all the materials by which it has been aided, and bring to light only *what it has made of them*. Even if there shall appear in you a likeness to him who, by reason of your admiration, has left a deep impress upon you, I would have you resemble him as a child resembles his father, and *not* as a picture resembles its original [...]. (279-281, emphasis added)

Seneca calls us to copy the bees, to imitate their behavior, or in the terms of self writing, to imitate a practice: i.e., to gather material. The “gathering” of material and the “blending” of it is the reading and rereading and writing about that material in order to bring it into our minds and make something of it, to produce thought, insight, and other material which can, in turn, be digested again by others (and by the self).

The digestive process, then, works on at least a couple of levels: it occurs when the writer reads, again when the writer writes, and again when the writer reads what s/he is writing. These “levels” are so difficult to separate out, in fact, that the term “levels” fails to capture the process, yet I struggle to come up with another term. My point, though, is that one is not ever simply receiving information in some passive state when s/he writes or reads, not even when s/he writes or reads to imitate. The activity of engaging with a text is more complicated than any theory of language-transmitting-knowledge suggests. Because there

is no simple route for transmission (from writer to word to reader), originality is more complicated, too.

If knowledge (including self-knowledge) is not transmitted but is generated, is sustained/created, in the encounter between writer and text and reader, then originality of thought, for example, is not some quality transmitted from writer to page. Rather, originality of thought is a quality that is experienced because of the inevitable variety that occurs in the encounter between writer and text and reader and text and so on. I explain it to my students this way: innumerable forces are working in me (time, gravity, etc.), and those forces are made sense of within various discourses (e.g., of ethnicity and age and gender, etc.), and all of those relations that for a brief moment constitute a “me” are brought into relation with, say, Montaigne’s “Of Experience.” Something happens in that encounter; no doubt, many somethings happen—too many to account for in a stable, consistent “me.”

At first, my students find this different conception of subjectivity to be overwhelming, sometimes infuriating. But, eventually, many of them recognize and embrace the fact that in this different conception of subjectivity, a different kind of subject emerges—one that is not “given” by Nature or by a society, but one that is constituted in forces and discourses and can, thus, not only change but be changed. In other words, my students begin to see that who they are is not determined, and then, with the help of a few models, they begin to feel some hope for participating in their own constitution. That is when I bring in model texts that investigate the self and in which the writer works to participate in his/her own constitution—not those who look for who they are at some essential core or who they are determined to be by social forces. Rather, I introduce them to writers who “broke the mold” in working to know the self. For all that his work is despised and misunderstood, Nietzsche’s longer works are excellent examples of a writer participating in his own constitution by digesting the “already said.”

For example, here’s how Nietzsche “inherits,” or digests and makes something of, Seneca’s bee metaphor in *Genealogy of Morals*: “It has rightly been said: ‘Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’; our treasure is where the beehives of our knowledge are. We are constantly making for them, being by nature winged creatures and honey-gatherers of the spirit; there is one thing alone we really care about from the heart—‘bringing something home’” (15). In this metaphor, beehives are where the production of knowledge happens. And, according to Nietzsche, we are always striving for those sites of production. We are always working to return to the hive, to recognize what we’ve discovered, to see how we know, to digest our inventions and the inventions of others, and to render the unified body that is (self)knowledge.

In self writing, one is able to do exactly that: the writer meditates on material

in order to digest it, to do something with it, to know it, and in knowing and digesting and doing, to constitute a self. As Foucault explains, “The role of writing is to constitute, along with all that reading has constituted, a ‘body’ [that which digests and can be digested]” (“Self Writing” 213). This body can be the body of the book, the material work, the material production. As scholars, we recognize this process every time we say something like, “Nietzsche is...,” according to the body that is constituted in his published works.

How is this moment of recognition, though, different from the one that Pratt describes in “Arts of the Contact Zone,” where she describes Poma-the-author as equal to the same collection of social, historical, and political elements that make up Poma-the-man? It is different because in the process of self writing, i.e., in the processes of meditation, and in the recognition of how those processes work, when we say “Nietzsche,” we acknowledge that we cannot capture the flesh-and-blood figure; we can only refer to the body that is his work. That said, we can also acknowledge that in engaging with the text that is “Nietzsche,” we are engaging with a text that helped to shape the flesh-and-blood man. Somehow, that is an incredibly powerful realization—perhaps more powerful than the assumption that his text is simply a reflection of his original self.

NIETZSCHE’S MEDITATIONS ON MONTAIGNE

I say that this realization is powerful, in part, simply because Nietzsche so deliberately, even obsessively, meditated on Montaigne’s work.³⁶ As a result, both writers, though two very different writers, seem to have been working on the same project—what it might mean to know the self and how to go about knowing it. In their efforts, both recognized and discussed at length the same obstacle to that project (our obsession with the future). And, both attempted to work through that obstacle in the same meditative form (the essay) and within the same meditative practices found in self writing (e.g., the truth test). What ends up on the page of one writer, though, looks very different from the other.

In his introduction to the reader, Montaigne states that he has written this book of essays for his friends and family, “so that when they have lost me (as soon they must), they may recover here some features of my habits and temperament, and by this means keep the knowledge they have had of me more complete and alive.” He goes on to say that he has tried to portray his self simply, “without straining or artifice.” In the end of the address, he states, “Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book” (2). To summarize, then, Montaigne tells his reader that he has made his self the subject of his collection of essays in order to grant his reader the material with which they could “recover” some features of him. He does not say, “here I am.” Rather, he says that his self is the material, the subject,

of the book. And, this distinction is interesting because it suggests, again, that the text produced is a constituted body, rendered in a series of meditations that can, in turn, be meditated on by others—which is exactly what Nietzsche did.

One can see the intensity of Montaigne's project's influence on Nietzsche's own project in the Preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche begins the text with this: "We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge [...]." A few lines later, he continues:

Present experience has, I am afraid, always found us 'absent-minded': we cannot give our hearts to it—not even our ears! Rather, as one divinely preoccupied and immersed in himself into whose ear the bell has just boomed with all its strength the twelve beats of noon suddenly starts up and asks himself; 'what really was that which just struck?' so we sometimes rub our ears afterward and ask, utterly surprised and disconcerted, 'what really was that which we have just experienced?' and moreover: 'who are we really?' and, afterward as aforesaid, count the twelve trembling bell-strokes of our experience, our life, our being—and alas! Miscount them.—so we are necessarily strangers to ourselves [...]. We are not 'men of knowledge' with respect to ourselves. (15)

I quote this extensive passage because I think it an excellent example of the essayistic (or explorative) development of ideas that Nietzsche is so famous for—i.e., the way in which he develops an idea by mapping back over content and intensifying it with each new sentence. More importantly, this passage demonstrates that, as he develops the analogy of the man startled by the clock's bell, Nietzsche introduces his project. In the larger text, he will explore just who and what we are, or more specifically, how we came to be who and what we are. Part of that "how" is a consequence of our practice of negation of present experience, our rejection of it, as we obsess, instead, over the future. In the end, Nietzsche will argue that man is a sick animal because of that negation, because he is "eternally directed toward the future." Nietzsche states that man's "restless energies never leave him in peace, so that his future digs like a spur into the flesh of every present" (121). It is a compelling metaphor—one that stands, in part, for the god-fearing man living for the afterlife, the ultimate future, and a future that, in turn, requires him to negate the value of this life, except as a means to the greater end.

Montaigne, on the other hand, seems not to be obsessed with that "ultimate" future; rather, he cares to make himself strong, resilient for any future strife in this life, as I've shown in Chapter 3. He finds, though, that sacrificing

the present for worry about any future is dangerous. In fact, he quotes Seneca, who warns that such worry makes us “vulnerable.” In “Our Feelings Reach Out Beyond Us,” Montaigne states, “We are never at home, we are always beyond. Fear, desire, hope, project us toward the future and steal from us the feeling and consideration of what is, to busy us with what will be, even when we shall no longer be. ‘A soul anxious about the future is most vulnerable’” (8). This insight may very well be that which inspired Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*, for the book is, arguably, a response to this very insight. Nietzsche says as much in the Preface, as the passage above demonstrates.

Perhaps, then, it is not too much of a stretch to argue that Nietzsche’s collection of essays (*On the Genealogy of Morals*) is a meditation on our obsession with the future and what it has done to shape the genealogy of Western morality. Through that insight and meditation, his work has emerged as uniquely Nietzschean, though so obviously (to me, at least) grounded in, driven by, the works of his genealogical predecessor, Montaigne. Most importantly, I see a model in this relation between Montaigne’s and Nietzsche’s work—one that could have game-changing pay-offs for our essay students today.

FOR OUR STUDENTS

I recommend that we, as essay teachers, frame our essay classes around the practices of the “care of self,” as I’ve described here and in Chapter 3. Unlike more typical essay classes, then, this change would mean that we not simply ask them to read essays and come to class ready to talk about them, that we not simply ask them to write essays and come to class ready to share them. If students are to learn how to write meditative essays, then they must learn by practice, but not just any practice, certainly not just by writing *more*. Rather, as I’ve shown, there are specific practices available to them that are graspable, doable, and void of scary and/or inaccessible requests, such as “find your true voice” or “reconstruct your self in a socially critical way.” The practices of imitation in an essay classroom should operate like practices of meditation: they should encourage students to read, reread, to engage, reengage, to write, rewrite in response to the essays they’ve read, to the conversations they’ve participated in, to what they see, hear, think day to day.

After all, we are not writing in a vacuum. When writing, we are always participating in discourses, always practicing the (writing/speaking) practices that are already available to us; however, by participating in the constellation of discourses and practices that are at work in a particular movement, in a particular stroke of pen on page or finger on keyboard, we are always doing something *different* with what’s been done before—even and especially when participating in the

practices of imitation-as-meditation. If we really intensify those practices, then I believe our students will produce much meatier essays, essays that are inevitably different and self-constituting because of the intensity of the meditation.

This seems to me to be one of many options for introducing students to a method of essaying via imitation that is productive. Student essayists can practice the essay by meditating on the issues, insights, and strategies explored by other essayists in other essays; their imitation, though, would be less about mimicking content or technique and more about starting somewhere. They can start by answering the claim of another text, examining it at length within its own context and in other contexts (think about the “truth test” described in Chapter 3). The key is in the examination—what I’ve been calling “meditation.” It is, perhaps, a circular process, one in which insights are “digested” (ingested and re-produced differently), but in that process, the student recognizes that insights do not occur “out of the blue” and that the self, too, does not occur from spontaneous generation. In such ways, essaying would become something other than simply navel-gazing. It would be a practice that requires intense study, used for the purpose of constituting a self on the page that can in turn be used as material for study.

Students may come to know their selves in essaying, but certainly not a fixed self, certainly not a stable self. They would begin to see the self as, yes, continuous, but not as entirely consistent. They would begin to see that the self on the page changes, not only because of their own changes of mood and experience, but because of what they’ve read, the shape of the assignment, the demands of their reader/grader, the experimental grammar used in an essay, the skepticism practiced in it, and so on and on. They would recognize, too, that the self that is constituted, then, on the page is not somehow “less true” because it is constituted within these contours, but is possible because of these contours, which brings us to the focus of the next chapter: how to set up such contours in order to enable this kind of essaying in an essay course.

NOTES

33. Perhaps the lack of specificity in readings of student writing practices/strategies in personal essays is due, in part, to the fact that, as Lynn Bloom notes in “The Essay Canon,” there is not enough critical work in response to essays (403)—scholarly readings that might serve as models for in-the-classroom readings.

34. Please note that Elbow does not in any of his works claim that writing teachers should comment little on their students’ works. As I’ve shown elsewhere, he does value and call for feedback for student writing. Perhaps he isn’t commenting much on student writing at this early point in his career (when *Writing Without Teachers*

and *Writing with Power* were published) because he hasn't fully figured out what writing with voice is yet—and thus, how to comment on it. Unfortunately, I think that writing teachers have inherited this idea that they don't need to comment much on student writing, at least not if they are most interested in identifying where voice seems to occur in the text and where it doesn't.

35. I have found that when the essay is included in composition textbooks, there is more instructional material incorporated. For example, in *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing* (3rd ed), Ramage, et al., talk at greater lengths about the essay's emphasis on exploration and provide exercises for exploration. I've also found, though, that the essay is used in composition textbooks as a kind of preliminary writing tool for the more serious stuff of arguments (like in the case of *The Allyn and Bacon Guide*). The textbooks that take the essay more seriously, as a genre worth studying and practicing in its own right (not toward another end), are generally creative nonfiction anthologies. In my project here, though, I don't want to denigrate the personal essay to a mere brainstorming-exercise, nor do I want to accept the practice of teaching-via-anthology at face value.

36. It's well-recognized that Nietzsche was an avid reader of Montaigne's works. For specifics, see Dorothea Heitsche's "Nietzsche and Montaigne: Concepts of Style." In it, Heitsch lists the various accounts of Nietzsche talking in letters and in notes about reading Montaigne's *Essais*. Heitsche also notes, though, that little had been said of the relationship between the two writers, as of the publication of her article (1999), and I'd argue that there is still a disappointing lack of treatment of that relationship in scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition and in Creative Confiction.