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Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal

Candace Spigelman

We have not been as bold as we might have been in establishing modes of nonscientific inquiry because what is not scientific is often dismissed as not rigorous.

—James C. Raymond, “Enthymemes, Examples, and Rhetorical Method”

I have faith that if students attend more and more closely to their experience, they will gradually be led to sounder questioning and thinking.

—Peter Elbow, “Response”

In composition studies, the case of the personal is both historical and political. Traditionally, writing research required an objective stance: stories of lived experience were antithetical, first, to positivist research paradigms and, later, to theory and interpretation. In recent years, established scholars have made small inroads to promote experience-based writing, but for the most part, personal writing remains untrustworthy or “sentimental.” In classrooms too, opponents of expressivist writing pedagogy have long maintained that writing instructors do their students a disservice by encouraging personal narratives in first-year writing courses. Pointing to the public discourse of classical rhetoric and the social features of knowledge-making, they argue that instruction in academic discourse more effectively prepares students to engage and critique the institutions that shape their lives. In response, supporters of personal writing in various settings have proclaimed it an addition to, rather than a substitute for, academic writing, asserting that personal writing serves different purposes. Peter Elbow explains that personal writing encourages students to want to write for their own pleasure and that it offers an

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alternative approach to solving problems and gaining new insights. For Elbow, “discourse that tries to render experience,” that is, “language that conveys to others a sense of their [writers’] experience—or indeed, that mirrors back to [writers] themselves a sense of their own experience from a little distance” is equal in value to expository discourse, although it serves different purposes (136–7).

I would argue that the telling of stories can actually serve the *same* purposes as academic writing and that narratives of personal experience can accomplish serious scholarly work. I want to move beyond the notion of the personal as supplement to advance the position that narrative, in its various forms, is a logical and legitimate mode of argument appropriate to the academic writing of both composition scholars and their students. Indeed, stories and examples have always been woven into successful arguments, oftentimes so seamlessly that readers do not even mark them.

In the discussion that follows, I review arguments both for and against the personal as/in academic writing, suggesting that even supporters of experiential writing generally fall short of establishing its argument-based role. I then turn to Aristotle’s discussions of narration and example and to compatible contemporary rhetorics and methodologies to explore the efficacy of narrative argument in academic writing. Finally, I examine the advantages as well as the dangers of conjuring stories as evidence in order to argue for the necessity of establishing effective standards of judgment for narrative inquiry.

DEFINING PERSONAL WRITING

Although autobiography, memoir, and personal essays appear as acts of self-revelation, voluntary self-descriptions of a life and of life experiences, contemporary critics recognize these acts as hermeneutic figurings organized to tell a story of coherent experience (Olney; Couser; Eakin; Gillmore) and organized by means of a narrative persona, a representation, rather than the “real” flesh and bones autobiographer or essayist (Klaus; Sanders; White, “Foreword”). Distinguishing between the various uses of the personal risks oversimplification: categories easily overlap and run together, often replicating form while differing in purpose.

As memoirs, personal narratives are generally thought to be selective, self-contained autobiographical accounts, although writers themselves seldom satisfactorily define narrative genres. Annie Dillard writes that memoir is “any account, usually in the first person, of incidents that happened a while ago” (41), while William Zinsser describes it as “a window into life” (11). Alice Walker’s “When the Other Dancer Is the Self” illustrates the tightly focused, all-of-a-piece narrative characteristic of many contemporary memoirs: it chronicles events leading to a childhood accident with a pellet gun, a pivotal moment of disfigurement to both the narrator’s eye and her self-esteem; then the story continues, relating the series of incidents in her personal

life that led to self-acceptance and emotional healing. In contrast are personal narratives reminiscent of some of Montaigne's *Essais*, where the narrator's experience is woven into a tapestry of reflections about larger issues. Typical of this approach are essays such as "Aria," a literacy narrative in *Hunger of Memory*, which depicts young Richard Rodriguez's struggle to accommodate his Spanish language of home, family, and comfort with the austere expression of American English. Rodriguez sketches a series of scenes—the child at play and in the classroom; the nuns' visit, demanding spoken English in the Rodriguez household; a family Christmas devoid of Spanish chatter; a grandmother's deathbed expression of cultural loyalty bound to native language—all intended to show that struggles over language and therefore conflicts over identity are, in Rodriguez's view, painful but necessary aspects of cultural and political assimilation.

In narratives such as E. B. White's "Sootfall and Fallout," the personal is used as a frame to speculate on a broader topic. White begins by reflecting on various types of pollution outside his window, then moves to larger environmental and ecological considerations, but his purpose is to warn his readers about nuclear arms-building. This is not to suggest that one form of personal writing is more critical than another; on the contrary, all forms of the personal can serve political, social, or cultural purposes. (For a thorough analysis of personal narrative structures as rhetorical strategies, see Hesse; for an examination of personal essays that attempt to reconcile the mind/body dialectic, see Spigelman, "Embodying the Essay"). Politically, these purposes are most fully realized in the kind of writing that is sometimes called "autoethnography," autobiographical accounts such as Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps*, Linda Brodkey's "Writing on the Bias," and Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* (although Rose objects to the use of the term to describe his work). By embedding their personal stories into contexts in which race, class, and gender and other constructs are made visible, these writers seek to subvert traditional political and cultural associations relating to personal achievement. Autoethnographic writing insists that the narrative of an individual's life is both the product and process of surrounding social and educational narratives. Patricia Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* takes personal narrative even further, combining academic and autobiographical writing to argue legal theory.

In classrooms, the "personal narrative" is generally associated with less lofty ends. The term itself often describes the product of expressive writing instruction. It may be used interchangeably with "free writing," that is, writing for-the-self, writing used to find or construct meaning with or without autobiographical reference. Or it may be used pejoratively to describe developing writers' chronologies of confession or insight.

In the discussion that follows, I use the terms "personal writing" and "personal narrative" interchangeably to refer to the ways in which writers make sense of their

lives by organizing their experience into first-person stories. Such stories may be expressed in a single sentence or as a lengthy chronological account, but in all cases, their telling is purposeful; they are intended to serve ends beyond pure expression of opinion or cathartic confession. Moreover, whether that purpose is scholarly, political, or aesthetic, neither the veracity of the experience nor the authenticity of the writer's emotions is relevant criteria for assessing the text's achievement. Because scholars write academic arguments in a variety of forms, my analysis will continually cross genre boundaries.

PERSONAL WRITING AS SCHOLARSHIP

Although most of us enjoy reading personal accounts, they have fought a long battle for recognition in academic settings, and prejudice against personal narratives (indeed, against uses of the first person in general) continues in many disciplines to this day. According to some theorists, the denial of the personal dates back to Plato's allegory of the cave, where only philosophers (that is, experts) could see past blinding sense experience to the "reality" of the world of Forms (Newkirk 121–22). Others speculate that the personal came to be "formally" excluded when early experimentalists sought to purge scientific language and scientific texts of the taint of subjectivity by eliminating all traces of the narrator or the narrator's voice (Paradis). According to Robert J. Connors, the objective, scientific model dominated in nineteenth-century Germany, as scholars published their empirical research. Its extraordinary influence in American universities helps to explain why, as American literary studies emerged as a discipline at the turn of the century, it sought credibility in a scientific model in which literary criticism tried to appear objective, factual, and impersonal (*Composition*; see also, Graff; Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*). Contemporary critical approaches acknowledge the complex social features of any reading and thus recognize the impossibility of "impersonal" interpretation. Most notably, in the 1980s, feminist scholars began to pave the way for the use of the personal as evidentiary. Heather Dubrow observes that "turning an object into evidence is like gift-wrapping it: the agent performing the action defines and delimits the significance of the object" (16). No fact or story is of itself "evidence" because evidence is constructed rhetorically and then accepted and endorsed as material. Thus, what counts as evidentiary is determined by those positioned to credentialize and validate particular objects or discourses. Because traditional forms of evidence-making have served to silence those viewed as outside mainstream Western culture, including women and minorities, establishing experiential arguments in feminist research stands as "a significant and subversive act," giving voice and authority to women's claims to knowledge by naming their experiences as relevant and admissible data (Foss and Foss 42).

While personal writing has not been fully embraced in all arenas of the literary

community, it had found enough support to warrant a 1996 PMLA volume dedicated to the “Place of the Personal in Scholarship.” Typically, arguments for the personal point to the limits of objectivity in all forms of research, including work in literary studies and history, social science, and even the natural sciences (see, for example, Dubrow; Bazerman; Gilbert and Mulkey; Latour and Woolgar). Regardless of its form in first-person narrative or third-person exposition, advocates say, all writing is personal in the sense that both style and interest are features of social, political, and individual values and investments. Some theorists who embrace the personal in writing and research argue that knowledge of a researcher’s social, political, and personal circumstances provides important information concerning his or her findings. Joan W. Scott cites de Certeau, “The place where discourse is produced is relevant” (Scott 789), to argue for the importance of understanding the ways experiences have been configured for the narrator of any historical account and also to point out how often “power or politics in these [traditional] notions of knowledge and experience” remains hidden or obscured (783; see also Tannen 1152; Bérubé 1065).

Many scholars also claim that uses of the personal are strategic. The personal may function as a mask in a calculated performance, creating a reader-friendly voice and persona (Molloy 1073; Davidson 1071). Or it may operate in the service of argument as a kind of ethos-building strategy, where the narrator establishes his or her credibility by means of a voice or persona with which the audience might identify (in Kenneth Burke’s sense of the term), or trust (in Aristotle’s sense) and thus be persuaded (Boone 1152). (For analyses of subtle distinctions in the definition of “ethos,” “voice,” and “persona” and their use in Aristotle, Wayne Booth, and Kenneth Burke, see Cherry; Enos; Halloran.)

In composition studies, the historical trajectory of personal writing paralleled literary studies, although the controversies have different starting points. According to Wendy Bishop, in the late 1960s, composition research followed a social scientific, educational model, calling for controlled, replicable experiments and science-based reporting. Its “legacy,” Bishop notes, was “decontextualized” cognitive research (“Students’ Stories” 201–2), which continued to be published through the 1980s in such journals as *Research in the Teaching of English*. In Thomas Newkirk’s view, empirical research helped to establish composition as a discipline by deprecating teacher lore and other “traditional sources of knowledge,” including personal experience (122; see also North). By the mid-1980s, however, ethnography, case study, and other qualitative methodologies began to emerge and by the early 1990s to dominate composition research. Bishop notes the shift from the positivistic paradigm as unsurprising, given its failure to focus on questions of gender, race, and class, to challenge existing institutional power arrangements, or to acknowledge the rhetorical aspects of knowledge-making (“Students’ Stories” 202–03). By contrast,

the ethnographer's intrusiveness in the study setting as well as his or her biases and interpretive stance are all foregrounded (Brodkey). Qualitative research articles are often written in first person and case studies exploit narrative techniques, not only for their aesthetic effects but also to underscore the social constructedness of the research itself.

Feminist scholarship also influenced composition research practices. In particular, Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule's *Women's Ways of Knowing*, with its examples drawn from the transcripts of actual research subjects, served as a model for case research using personal narratives. Likewise, Jane Tompkins's "Me and My Shadow" offered a new form of scholarly argument. Olivia Frey's 1990 *College English* article shows feminists in composition calling into question the discipline's use of academic argument as "adversarial," opting for more personal and open-ended forms of scholarly discourse. These arguments paved the way for the publication of texts such as Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan Hunter's *Writing Ourselves into the Story*, a collection of essays about teaching writing dedicated to the personal perspectives, or "unheard voices," of writing instructors who view themselves as outside mainstream theory-building.

In recent years, composition scholars in some arenas have taken a dramatic turn toward the personal and experiential, with conferences such as the NCTE Conference, "Stories in the Classroom: Narration as Knowledge," in Tucson. As keynote speaker, Joseph Trimmer received strong support when he criticized the professional enculturation that has made so many composition scholars distrust stories (both literary and anecdotal) in favor of theory and interpretation. Like Fontaine and Hunter's edition, the essays in Trimmers' *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life* construct a collective argument for the value and importance of personal experience. These collections represent small inroads in favor of the personal in academic publications.

However, in general, opportunities for such writing tend to be confined to those who have already paid their professional dues. Discussing ethnographic projects and the freedom of the "I-witnessing" voice, Wendy Bishop addresses directly the scholars' earned "right" to speak. Bishop points out that if, in ethnographic research, validity depends on the constructed author, then only those who have established themselves within the discipline may experiment with ethical and emotional appeals, by virtue of their having already developed a recognized and accepted ethos within the community. Writing in 1987, Bishop recognized that such avenues were not open to graduate students writing dissertations. Again in 1998, Joy Ritchie's student, Thelma, observed in her journal that only those academics who had achieved "a certain status of establishment, respectability, and safety" could experiment with alternative forms of written discourse (Ritchie and Ronald 236). In her recent CCCC talk, Lynn Bloom discussed the difficulties she faced in 1992 as she tried to publish

her personal/academic essay, "Teaching College English as a Woman," in *College English*.

Indeed, the question of the personal in composition remains stunningly political. Often scholars who prize the telling of personal stories for their colleagues emphatically oppose writing instruction that would allow the same for students. Their objections are based on a postmodern understanding of the social construction of human subjectivity. Thus, while traditionalists in the academy reject personal experience as inherently subjective and "unscientific," postmodernists question its representation of subjects as individuals. In particular, they reject modes of writing instruction that suggest that a writer "can be free beyond the contingencies of history and language" (Clifford 39).

PERSONAL WRITING AS WRITING INSTRUCTION

Objections to what is commonly called expressivist pedagogy represent various reactions to the personal in the history of writing instruction in the United States. According to Connors, until the end of the Civil War, writing instruction in colleges and in most secondary schools relied on classical methods of invention and composition, using public topics developed from "gleaned knowledge mixed with commonly held beliefs" ("Personal" 170). Students called upon their own store of cultural knowledge, a repertoire of readings, quotations, and commonplace books, to provide content for their arguments and assertions. As education opened its doors to those who were not classically educated, however, writing teachers turned to the expressive essay, a vehicle in which students could draw from their own experiences and insights, rather than from formal topics thought to be outside their fields of knowledge ("Personal" 171). Connors notes, however, that the popularity of personal writing in the early twentieth century resulted from a host of historical and social changes: a change in literary taste, including a preference, along with the Romantic movement, for a depiction of everyday experience expressed in everyday language; a change in the center of knowledge, from divine or external truth to the individual's inner consciousness; and in education, a shift to a Deweyian emphasis on the individual student ("Personal"; see also Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*).

In its contemporary formulation, expressive writing pedagogy resulted from the good faith efforts of many writing teachers to encourage students to find and express their individual "voices," or, as Donald Stewart notes of the revival of expressive writing pedagogy in the 1960s and 1970s, "to escape from the pasteurized and pedestrian prose . . . [students] had been conditioned to produce in the traditional, [that is, current traditional writing] classroom" (66), particularly the hollow and formulaic five-paragraph theme. Stewart and James Berlin emphasize that expressivist rhetoric as it was taught in the sixties and seventies was "unsparingly

critical of the dominant social, political, and cultural practices of the time” (Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology” 485). The goal of this kind of teaching was to empower students to speak their own minds and to find their own individual, unique voices in order to express their own opinions and to dissent.

Eventually, for some writing teachers, expressive writing came to be understood as writing-as-self-expression or writing-for-self-discovery. The evolution of the personal expressive essay to emotive or confessional writing seems to have arisen from confusion between methods (free writing, journals, workshop conversation) and emphasis (on individual voice and colloquial discourse) on the one hand, and a change in expectations about content, in which personal feelings and insights now gave the essay its own reason for being. To many composition theorists, expressive rhetoric’s insistence on students’ private voices, visions, and ultimate authority over their texts creates an inaccurate and ingenuous conception of the composing process. It seems to suggest that language is a transparent vehicle for exposing the thought processes of a unified and consistent mind at work, a mind that, if adequately investigated, will reveal the truths about itself and about life. Such an approach, they say, overemphasizes the power of personal insight and ignores the ways that knowledge is constructed socially (Faigley; Bartholomae, “Writing”; Clifford). Still others argue that an expressive approach to writing valorizes an asocial, noncollective individual (Trimbur; Berlin, “Rhetoric and Reality”; LeFevre), and that it divisively pits the individual against the group. When students are “asked to imagine that they can clear out a space to write on their own, to express their own thoughts and ideas, not to reproduce those of others,” David Bartholomae argues in “Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow,” “. . . it is an expression of a desire for an institutional space free from institutional pressures, a cultural process free from the influence of culture, an historical moment outside history, an academic setting free from academic writing” (64). The dream of a free space, Bartholomae contends, blinds both students and teachers to the ways that authority and power are reproduced in language and culture (“A Reply” 129).

Furthermore, according to academic discourse proponents, writing teachers handicap students when they fail to equip them with the specialized discourses and discursive strategies they will need to be successful in college. In order to gain access to the academic community, to both share in and critique its central questions, students need to understand its expectations as articulated through its discourse conventions and its texts (Bizzell; Miller). Although both the metaphor of community and the politics of academic writing instruction have themselves been subject to critique, advocates of academic discourse rightfully object to semester-long composition programs that call for writing as personal confession, the cathartic soul-searching narrative of trauma or enlightenment associated with expressivism taken to extreme. Such writing, as Lester Faigley has shown, is intrusive on every side and

tends to honor particular constructions of the student's character and to encourage the evaluation of students' lives instead of their work. (I discuss the problematic of expressive writing instruction in some detail in "Teaching Expressive Writing as a Narrative Fiction").

Thus, I would agree with David Bartholomae's critique of expressive writing instruction that suggests to students the expression of a coherent and autonomous subjectivity unfettered by the forces that construct us socially and therefore ideologically. But personal writing that serves academic purposes need not be, indeed should not be, self-disclosive; neither should its ends be emotive and self-serving. Those who support classroom instruction in personal writing point to the ease and accessibility of expressive writing. Advocates assert that narrative as form is more adaptable and readable than the obfuscatory theoretical writing required of most college students. Moreover, because academic writing is noticeably formal in tone and style, they see in personal writing a method for helping students to understand and clarify their academic material. At the same time, they say, personal writing encourages students to want to write for their own pleasure (Elbow 136–37; see also Recchio). Experience-based writing is thus a method of helping students to enter the academic conversation, by bringing their own "extratextual knowledge" and the authority of their own voices to the texts they read (Spellmeyer 269; see also Bishop, "Students"). As I hope to show, narratives of personal experience can operate at a sophisticated level of argument. Furthermore, students have shown themselves to be adept in subverting writing assignments that call for "authentic" and "honest" descriptions of their lived experiences (Spigelman, "Teaching").

Finally, whether they appeal to the accessibility of narrative form, the subjectivity of all research and scholarship, or the strategic elements of personal voice, most arguments for including experiential writing in academic discourse show the personal as a supplement to traditional "rational" argument. That is, few go so far as to assert that narrative is a type of logical argument or that personal experience can stand as evidence on its own terms. To make this case, we must turn first to Aristotle, noting in this turn that "the [classical] center may sometimes be a place of recovery and resistance" where traditional rhetoric can be "re-dressed" for contemporary analysis (Ritchie and Ronald 219). In invoking Aristotle's notion of argument, I take my cue from feminists Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald, who point out that traditional rhetorical strategies should not necessarily be understood as reifying hierarchical values and oppressive binaries. They explain that both public and private argument have been integral to women's rhetorical history, and that "to see argument as male and narrative as female, for example, or to locate patriarchal discursive authority in the rational mind and feminist authority in subjective experience—not only may be inaccurate but also may limit women's rhetorical options and ignore the rhetorical power of much of women's writing throughout history" (234–35).

THE LOGIC OF NARRATIVE

Justification for the use of stories, including those derived from lived experience, is explicit in Aristotle's discussion of narration (*diegesis*) in Book III and implicit in his attention to example (*paradeigma*) in Book II of *Rhetoric*. For the epideictic rhetoric of praise or blame, Aristotle recommends brief stories scattered throughout a speech that serve to back up specific features or qualities of the individual being described. Aristotle sees a place for narrative in judicial rhetoric as well. In the hands of the prosecution, narrative functions to clarify the events under consideration or to persuade the audience that harm or injustice has occurred. For the defense, narrative offers a means of building ethos or justifying actions. On both sides, narrative can invoke both ethical and pathetic arguments. Narrating the individual's deliberate choices or attributes of character and connecting them to moral principles help to establish an ethical character with which the audience can identify; "speak[ing] from the emotions, narrating both the results [of emotion] and things the audience knows" (271) is akin to the effects of tragedy, where the audience identifies with the characters and events on stage.

In Aristotle's discussion of deliberative oratory, narrative is used to explore past events, "in order that by being reminded of those things the audience will take better counsel about what is to come" (272). Thus, narrative seems closely associated with the use of "paradigm," or inductive argument from example, a common feature of deliberative rhetoric. (In drawing this parallel between narrative and example in *Rhetoric*, I follow on James C. Raymond's observation that Aristotle's examples always assume a diachronic structure: "[E]ach one is a story, an event leading to another event, like cause to consequence, not with the inexorable determinism of scientific causality, but in a pattern of probable causality, suggesting that if analogous events were to take place again, analogous consequences would be likely to ensue" [146].) Examples, drawn from fiction and real life, allow the speaker and audience to reason a general rule from particular cases. Historical examples, in the form of stories of past events, are particularly suitable for deliberating future courses of action because "future events will be like those of the past" (181). Finally, underscoring the persuasiveness of personal testimony, Aristotle notes that when examples follow a central point, they act like "witnesses and a witness is everywhere persuasive" (181).

For Aristotle, "example" is both a way of reasoning, an alternative to enthymeme, as described in Book I, and the evidence provided by way of illustrations, as described in Book II. In *Rhetoric* and in *Prior Analytics*, example is defined as rhetorical induction; like its counterpart in formal logic or dialectic, it implies that a generalization will be gathered from the presentation of particulars, although with example the generalization is often applied to additional cases or situations. Underscoring

the logical reasoning required for the construction of examples as arguments, William Grimaldi states that “in using an example some transition to the universal has already been made by the mind if the mind is to discern any likeness or relevance of the example in the first place” (105; Benoit 185). (For debates on the logical construction of Aristotle’s examples, see Grimaldi; Benoit; Hauser.)

Raymond establishes the close working relationship between Aristotle’s discussions of example and enthymeme to explain how narrative proof emerges. While their formal features appear quite different, Raymond argues, these two central ways to demonstrate proof in a rhetorical argument rely on the same intellectual operations: generalizations emerging from prior assumptions and provided by the audience rather than stated by the rhetor. Like syllogisms in formal logic, enthymemes rely on a pattern of premises leading to a conclusion, although with enthymemes “the major premise may . . . be implied rather than expressed because the audience is presumed to know it” (142). Raymond explains that “[b]ecause enthymemes presume upon what an audience already knows or believes, they can express in a condensed or elliptical manner chains of logical connections that would be complex indeed if the assumptions themselves had to be demonstrated” (144).

Likewise, Raymond explains, an example relies on the audience’s assumptions to supply the logical “leap” needed to establish a general rule from multiple or extended examples. In other words, the “missing middle term” that is supplied by the audience for the enthymemic reasoning is also supplied in the process of drawing a generalization from the particulars in arguments using examples (147) and, I would add, using narratives in the manner described in *Rhetoric*. Following a similar line of analysis, John T. Gage observes that “[t]he enthymeme cannot be constructed in the absence of a dialectical relation with an audience, since it is only through what the audience contributes that the enthymeme exists as such” (157), and further that “Aristotle discusses the unsaid parts of a narrative and of a metaphor in the same way in which he discusses the unsaid parts of an enthymeme, as that which is supplied by the hearer” (282, note 14). If we hold with Grimaldi that “the enthymeme introduces Aristotelian logic to rhetoric . . . [making rhetoric] the study of reasoned statement” (16), then example and narrative are likewise components of rational argument.

Grimaldi celebrates the enthymeme for “incorporat[ing] in its arguments all of the elements demanded by language as the vehicle of discourse with another: reason, ethos, pathos” (17). Whether examples and illustrations are a form of enthymeme or whether they stand in their own right as a separate kind of argument, there can be no denying that ethos and pathos are features of rhetorical narratives. The speaker’s credibility and integrity, represented by the examples selected, and the response of the audience to the ways those particular stories are told are significant factors in the success of the speech. Like the cathartic moment in drama when the audience generalizes from the characters’ actions to its own particular experience, argument by

narrative or example features opportunities for interlocutors to generalize a rule that pertains to similar conditions in both the public and personal spheres.

At this point, I want to acknowledge that Aristotle does not conjure personal experience stories in his *Rhetoric*. However, he does use a host of examples drawn from the political events and speeches of his day, references bound to be familiar to students of his text. As Kate Ronald argues, in the fourth century, political and private lives were more deeply enmeshed than today, so that topics recommended for rhetorical training, such as war and peace or types of government, would be part of a student's personal knowledge and experience (42). Countering observations made by both Robert J. Connors and S. Michael Halloran that classical rhetoric was entirely public in form and content, Ronald asserts that classical rhetoric "emphasized a personal relationship between speaker and audience" and that the classical concept of ethos required that speakers assume personal responsibility for their discourse and its effects (38). Furthermore, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, among other writings, Aristotle places high value on the role of lived experience in the formation and acquisition of practical wisdom. Experience provides the understanding and familiarity with particulars that are needed for determining an appropriate course of action (158–60). In Book VI, he states explicitly, "We must attend, then, to the undemonstrated remarks [stories and comments] and beliefs of experienced and older people or of intelligent people, no less than to demonstrations. For these people see correctly because experience has given them their eye" (166). It would seem that for Aristotle, personal narratives significantly contribute to persuasive arguments and subsequent decision making.

So urgent is the narrative to human perspective that classical scholar Walter R. Fisher argues for a "narrative paradigm" of communicative rationality, in contrast to "the rational world paradigm" of traditional argument. Pointing out, in "Narrative as Human Communication Paradigm," that not all arguments are shaped by means of "self-evident propositions, demonstrations, and proofs" (268) and that reason need not be "attributed only to discourse marked by clearly identifiable modes of inference and/or implication" (266), Fisher attempts to explain how ordinary people construct arguments necessary for investigating real-world issues or for determining courses of actions. Based on Aristotle's concept of practical reason, Fisher's alternative paradigm depends on what he terms, "a logic of good reasons," a system of rhetorical analysis that provides for an evaluation of the values and assumptions embedded in argumentative discourse. In the model he proposes, narrative is broader in its scope than other paradigms, embracing many ways of telling, including the scientific. It extends the argument that objective claims merely disguise their subjective, personal stories and assert that narrativity is a dominant form of rationality and that "human communication should be viewed as historical as well as situational, as stories competing with other stories constituted by good reasons" (266). (In addition to

Fisher, most notably, M. M. Bakhtin, Jean Francois Lyotard, and Fredric Jameson have argued for narration as a central mode of human communication and understanding.) Within this larger framework of narrativity, Fisher makes a place for the personal and experiential stories. "The narrative perspective," he observes, ". . . has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination" (266). Although Fisher's theory of narrative reasoning is caught up in a larger debate over values and reliability testing in public moral arguments, its importance here is its willingness to affirm the personal narrative as rhetorical argument. (For critiques and/or extensions of Fisher's values approach to narrative, see Lucaites and Condit; Farrell; McGee and Nelson; Bennett and Edelman; Rowland.)

ARGUMENT FROM/AS PERSONAL NARRATIVE

The emerging body of qualitative research, ethnography, and case studies in the human sciences testifies to new-found appreciation for the personal and experiential as credible forms of scholarly evidence. In Thomas Newkirk's discussion of ethnographic methodology, we hear echoes of Grimaldi and William Lyon Benoit on Aristotle's example: an intellectual process in which the audience moves from a particular to an implied generalization/universalization to another particular. Newkirk states, "The power of this method is its capacity for particularization, for the creating of portraits of individual writers" (129). The researcher does not seek generalizability; instead "as readers we perform this act of generalization . . . [based on] the density of detail, the selection of incidents, and the narrative skill of the researcher" (130). Further, neutrality is not a goal of such research; instead the researcher foregrounds his or her biases, near-misses, personal perspectives, and values (130). Likewise, no truth claims are asserted for autoethnography, personal academic article, or personal scholarly essay, for as Linda Brodkey explains, "One studies stories not because they are true or even because they are false, but for the same reason that people tell and listen to them, in order to learn about the terms on which others make sense of their lives" (47). Researchers who favor personal writing acknowledge and celebrate the ways in which experiential evidence necessarily destabilizes certainty, the ways in which stories encourage contradiction and inconsistency and offer narrative layerings, all open to interpretation.

Lynn Worsham's essay in *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words*, provides a splendid model of the personal as scholarly evidence. In "After Words: A Choice of Words Remains," Worsham calls for current generations of feminists to put aside divisive attitudes intended to "expose the blindness of one feminism and the fraudulence of another" (351). In order to foster a third wave of movement for social change, Worsham says, feminists must "forge a collective subject capable of making mass movement" . . . an alliance that does not protect us from our differences but

finds in difference, disagreement, and even despair occasions to hear one another's words" (329). The choice of the infinitive "to hear" is not incidental, for Worsham builds her case, her deliberative argument, by telling a series of stories, allowing us to model, as we read, the intellectually active, generous listening required for just such collective subject formation.

As Aristotle advises, Worsham draws from the fictional and the experiential to make her case. She begins by reflecting on Toni Morrison's 1993 Nobel Prize speech, a lesson in life choices and the power of language to shape and reshape action, presented as an extended metaphor. As she retells Morrison's fictional narrative of the blind seer and the young people who challenge her with their hidden bird, asking "Is the bird . . . dead or alive?" (11; Worsham 331), Worsham reminds readers that Morrison's bird is language, and that it holds all generations equally responsible for the "word work" that is powerful enough "both to secure difference and to make a shareable world" (332). Her second narrative is personal, a family memoir: the account of "Blue Betty" provides a story of her own life, both made and fixed in language. According to Worsham, in an effort to question the arbitrariness of racial and gender constructions, her mother repeatedly told how the young child, Lynn, confused the words "colored" and "blue" to describe her African American caretaker. As a young adult, Worsham explains, she came to hate the story, recognizing its exploitative and ethnocentric dimensions, although it continued to haunt her. Worsham's third story is visual as well as narrative, constructed from a photograph of her maternal grandmother, a Native American, whose race and class remained a well-kept family secret. By piecing together her mother's past, itself a tale of racial and class identity-construction, she is able to find a way back through the "door" of the tale of Blue Betty, to appreciate it simultaneously from her mother's historical reality, from Betty's, and from her own, and to see the relationship, the interconnectedness, between these configurations. In this final story, she emphasizes that all of our perspectives, viewpoints, and memories are already drenched in "emotional coloration, that they are patterns of feeling—orchestrated in historically specific ways by categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality—that give an affective shape to experience and the stories we tell" (340).

As Aristotle intended, Worsham's stories serve as examples, specific cases of generational conflict from which her audience can generalize about the state of contemporary feminism. She clearly assumes that her readers, largely feminists in composition studies, represent various alliances in academic feminism, that they are all committed to furthering women's liberation, and that they share a common understanding of feminist scholarship. The collective dream of the "third wave," suggesting a galvanized political response, unites the audience and promotes the kind of community necessary for deliberative action. Each story has its own individual logic, or rational appeal; each in its own way argues for generational understanding,

tolerance, and responsibility. At the same time, Worsham establishes ethos by citing other respected writers and researchers. Demonstrating her own generous appreciation of the literature and its application to the current situation, her text and her reputation in the field mark her as an established scholar. Pathos is aroused by means of the text's own "word work," not only a tenderness expressed toward the "characters" in each of her stories, but a sensitive embrace of the audience who participates in weaving the tapestry together in order to understand its implications.

Unlike many academic essays that incorporate narrative, Worsham's academic discourse frames the personal and the fictive, instead of the other way around. Indeed, the stories themselves are so crucial to the essay's internal structure that they cannot be bracketed without dismantling the argument itself.

In our writing classes, we can use essays such as Worsham's as models, making a place for the personal in academic writing. We can teach novice writers to begin with a personal narrative that acts as a frame or introduction to a more complicated discussion and more accomplished writers to weave the narrative into the text, as Worsham does. Kurt Spellmeyer provides one example of such student writing. As an introduction to, and parallel argument for, the dilemma imposed by Sartre's existential ethical crises, Spellmeyer's student describes her decision to end the life of her pet rat. "She employs narrative incident just as Sartre does, to furnish practical illustrations of philosophic principles," Spellmeyer explains. Arguing that much academic discourse writing instruction forces students to accommodate the formal features of genre without adequate understanding of the subject matter, Spellmeyer notes that his student had "begun to perceive that the area of meaning defined by Sartre is not strictly Sartre's, or strictly her own, but a common ground. . . . If she continues to use writing in this fashion," Spellmeyer predicts, ". . . she will gradually enter the community of 'knowers' while retaining her own voice in the process" (274). Most significantly, the student's composition, like Worsham's, is not a confessional essay of personal angst or therapeutic rehabilitation, but an analytic argument, in which personal experience is used evidentially to illustrate and prove a particular position.

VALIDITY TESTING: RECONCILING NARRATIVE CLAIMS

Of course, invoking individual experience has inherent danger: because personal experience cannot be nullified or negotiated, it cannot be subjected to validity testing. In arguing that composition research must include student voices and that in doing so it must challenge positivist research paradigms, Wendy Bishop asserts: "Reliability is not at issue here; writers as humans are as complex as the communities they form and can never be studied the same way twice, exactly. Validity is not at issue here; we do not always study what we thought we were setting out to study, but

we are still learning from reflective practice” (“Students” 211). Likewise, Karen A. Foss and Sonja K. Foss claim that “[the question of what criteria] should be used to judge the admissibility of personal experience as evidence is irrelevant in feminist scholarship.” They argue that “[feminist scholars view] personal experience as always admissible because they are unwilling to declare some experience to be better than others—to make qualitative judgments about the nature of those experiences” (39; Belenky et al.).

However, many contemporary feminists see problems with these perspectives. Laura Brady argues that the use of experience as evidence in feminist research serves to essentialize women’s thoughts, writing, and actions by synecdochically using one case or story or voice to represent many, without attention to factors other than gender. Focusing on three seminal feminist texts that helped to make women’s experiences visible, Nancy Chodorow’s, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*, and Belenky et al.’s *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, Brady argues that “an uncritical reliance on experience as evidence constructs a type of fixed subjectivity. The use of experience as evidence rests upon assumptions that universalize the experience of one instead of exploring differences within and between subjects. The universalizing effect is the result of the transparency of gender: what a woman says is taken as evidence of what women think” (39). Brady is concerned that narratives of experience focus on “commonalty and congruity to the exclusion of contiguity and difference,” in particular the differences that are the effect of various socially constructed categories, including race, class, and gender (39), and proposes a process of interrogating personal citations by reading them metonymically.

Furthermore, historian Joan W. Scott argues that in many disciplines (and I would include composition as a field as well as composition as pedagogy), “experience” is an unproblematized concept. For Scott, “experience” is not an essential category on which researchers can depend to make claims or counterclaims to interpretation; rather, experience is made in and through language in the context of various social categories. Politically, she points out, “it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (779). Scott argues that although historians claim to interpret or reinterpret lived experiences or events, their claims generally fail to acknowledge how someone’s experience as a particular kind of subject is constituted or, further, to recognize that experiences have accrued to groups in particular ways because of the group’s status or victimization. As a countermeasure, Scott urges researchers to contextualize and investigate the language they use to represent experience and to interrogate its role in the process of subject formation.

Feminists like Brady and Scott call attention to the limits of the personal in academic writing, underscoring the need for critical reading and evaluation of experiential evidence. Pointing out that traditional scholarly methods rely on “the collegial,

collective, and communal process of producing, evaluating, and disseminating knowledge [which] is necessary to intellectual activity,” Richard Flores eloquently captures the problematic of validity testing in experiential research. I quote him at length:

The personal seemingly stifles this process by silencing the judgments and critiques of others. How are my evaluative peers to assess my scholarly work that is fastened to my experience of growing up in south Texas beneath the watchful eye of those whose views of Chicanos were blatantly racist? Could my peers write in their reviews that my account is incorrect and that I must reconsider my experience? How do they argue with my lived reality? We can dismiss the theoretical arguments of others as immaterial to a particular case, but it is more difficult to claim that lived experience, when used to verify a scholarly position, is invalid or irrelevant (1166).

I share these concerns about uses of the personal and want to relate two published stories in order to illustrate its difficulties.

“Daisies,” a personal narrative, was written by Ellen A. Laird, a full-time English instructor at Hudson Valley Community College in Troy, NY, and published recently in *TETYC*. Rummaging through her attic one day, Laird finds a short story, now 29-years-old, written by her husband when he was a high school sophomore. At the top of the first page, a grade of 95 is boldly circled. Neither comment nor criticism marks the paper, and Laird speculates as she reads about the kinds of response that she, a conscientious, theory-mind composition instructor, would have offered to this novice writer. Sitting in her attic, Laird reminds herself that her husband, now a successful attorney, exudes justifiable confidence in his writing and language skills. Perhaps, she thinks, her husband’s teacher was on to something. Perhaps comments, criticism, and revised drafts serve to squelch the “vulnerable inner center” of youthful creativity (124). The implied point of the story is that composition studies may be misguided in its efforts to foster revision by providing comprehensive responses to student papers. Perhaps it is product, not process, after all.

In contrast is Raymond Carver’s essay, “Creative Writing 101.” It too is a personal narrative. It too tells about a writing teacher, this time Carver’s first creative writing class in his first semester at college, taught by John Gardner, then a struggling novelist. Carver describes the course requirements, a ten- to fifteen-page short story, revised at least 10 times during the semester, and he describes his teacher’s method of instruction: “It was a basic tenet of his that a writer found what he wanted to say in the ongoing process of seeing what he’d said. And this seeing, or seeing more clearly, came about through revision. He believed in revision, endless revision; it was something very close to his heart and something he felt was vital for writers, at whatever stage of their development” (1584–85). Because someone was reading his stories carefully, responding to them, and taking them seriously, Carver says, he developed the confidence and the skills that propelled his career as a noted writer of short fiction. For Carver, then, intervention and process are requisite.

We have here two competing stories, each providing personal experience as evidence. Which do we accept and what are the consequences of that acceptance? For my part, Laird's is a dangerous essay. Overworked and exhausted writing teachers, I speculate, might well read in this narrative "proof" that comments and drafting are suspect; they might read it as permission to ignore twenty-some years of composition research in favor of the quick grade. On the other hand, because I read in Carver's essay "proof" that the strategies I use in my writing classes are sound, I naturally accept his evidence as reliable and valid. "It is here," as Flores has shown, "that suspicion must enter. If we accept the notion that scholarship in the humanities is judged not on verifiability but on rhetorically rendered and persuasively fashioned argumentation, we must also be suspicious of attempts to anchor positions in personal experience without discussion" (1166). Thus, if we want to continue to fight for the personal narrative, we will need to ensure measures for determining judgment.

James C. Raymond suggests one approach, which he bases on his understanding of the methodology required of Aristotle's rhetor and audience as they interactively produced the generalizations necessary for arguments by example or enthymeme. To test the validity of rhetorical arguments, Raymond wants students of rhetoric to identify and interrogate assumptions, "both explicit and implicit, that the presumed reader of the text is expected to share, and to locate the paradigms, if any, that form the basis of the argument." According to Raymond, we should not be asking, "Are its arguments [in this persuasive writing] valid?" Instead we should ask, "What would a reader have to believe in order to find the arguments persuasive?" Ultimately, he predicts, "the data and the analysis will persuade or fail to persuade not because of their own probative force, but because they will be presented in the context of assumptions and paradigms [illustrative patterns] that readers will either accept or reject" (150).

Similarly influenced by Aristotelian philosophy and rhetoric, but concerned primarily with questions of value in moral choice, Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm nicely extends Raymond's approach to include all diachronic discourses. Following a line of argument begun by Kenneth Burke and Ernst Cassirer, Fisher asserts that humans instinctively know how to produce and judge stories because stories are an "inherent" way of organizing experience and understanding that organization. All narratives may be evaluated and critiqued for their validity or "rationality" by applying principles of "*narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story," and "*narrative fidelity*, whether the stories they [audiences] experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives" ("Narrative" 272).

Narrative probability involves the formal features of the story, such as the consistency of characters and actions. In contrast, narrative fidelity is focused on substance; it poses questions about the narrative's relationship to the audience's values

and facts as individuals and as members of society. A text or argument that embodies narrative fidelity will, from Fisher's point of view, exhibit ethical and effective rhetorical performance, and this determination will come from asking critical questions about the implicit and explicit values expressed in the message: their implications, their appropriateness, their potential effects on individuals and community; their consonance with the reader's or critic's experience, the experience of others, or the experience implied in the narrative's audience construct; their potential for encouraging human understanding and moral conduct ("Toward" 370–80). Fisher makes it clear that the "logic of good reasons" will not decide the "best" answer among competing sets of "good" values. It will, however, make explicit both the heretofore unarticulated assumptions within the narrative and the values upon which those assumptions are based. For Fisher, as for Raymond, judgment of narrative requires an interrogation of the writer's and the audience's assumptions, although in Fisher's case the moral efficacy of the assertion will have some bearing on narrative validity.

While it is true, as critics have argued, that we cannot judge the truth of a writer's sense of his or her own lived experience (we cannot say that an event did not happen in a particular way if the speaker says that it did), we can nevertheless evaluate his or her interpretation of narrative events for their fidelity by examining his or her assumptions. Aristotle shows that an audience will assent to the inductive argument if it recognizes a correspondence between the illustration(s) and the generalization that is implied or stated. Both Raymond and Fisher explain that this concordance takes place with the acceptance of shared assumptions. That is, if the narrative is to be deemed reliable, both the writer and the reader must come to the same conclusion regarding the significance of its claims. Putting aside the issue of moral judgment, I want to take from Fisher's method and from Raymond's extensions of Aristotle the interrogation of assumptions as a means of evaluating the arguments in personal-experience stories.

Most published articles and much student writing that call upon the personal as evidence will demonstrate narrative probability, that is, plot and character coherence, by virtue of the accessibility of this genre. On some occasions, of course, inconsistencies will be noted and, at times, the absence of sufficient detail may limit the persuasive force of the argument. In the case of Laird's "Daisies," for example, the writer asserts a correlation between her husband's professional success and his high school teacher's rewarding without interference his developing writing skills. Judging the narrative probability of the story, we accept by its adherence to detail that it makes a good story. Judging its fidelity, however, asking whether the claims it makes are consistent with what educators and teachers of writing have experienced or studied, we will accept some of its assumptions and reject others. Most of us will agree that criticism is potentially destructive, that overly critical, overly zealous demands too often result in defensiveness and resistance, and that even the best of writers

may need time for readers' comments to "settle" and soften before they can be assimilated and transformed during revision. But will we accept that the attorney's confidence and professional success result from his tenth-grade English teacher's strategic noninterference? Might we ask, first, whether the absence of commentary was an intentional act of encouragement by the teacher and, further, whether his student "read" the response as encouragement? Rather than signaling a kinder, gentler approach to the text, might commentless grading suggest, instead, disinterest or diminishment of the task at hand? Might we also ask whether the student had, subsequently, taken writing courses that contributed to the development of his language skills? Finally, might we question whether particular economic and social pathways enabled him to develop the confidence he needed to become a successful trial lawyer, who "excelled in a career choice heavily dependent upon highly skilled, especially confident writing and thinking" (124)?

In evaluating this personal narrative, we might also call upon current theories relating to teaching and particularly to writing instruction. Here we find a body of research and a different set of assumptions: that students rarely learn in a vacuum; that only the best readers and the strongest students seem adept in imagining alternative possibilities, or moving to the next level of proximal development, without guidance; that human beings usually desire acknowledgment and feedback from the work they do; that most writers seek out readers for direction on revision (because we cannot see our own work as a reader sees it); that students today are learning that writing is not magical and therefore accessible only to those chosen few who already possess the "gift," but rather a process of work and drafts, something that can be taught and therefore learned. In the leap from cause to effect—in the unexplained variables and in the body of educational and composition research that supports formative teacher response—the logic of the argument in "Daisies" breaks down. We cannot accept its implicit assumptions. In contrast, Carver's narrative is not valid because it supplies more details to help us understand the move from cause to effect (although it does do this in a way that Laird's does not), but because its argument can be judged in the light of the same educational research and can be found consistent with that research to the extent that we are able to confirm it at this historical moment. Moreover, in accepting Carver's assumptions as correlative to our own, we bring to bear an examination of our experiences as students and as teachers receiving and providing reader feedback, including experiences with summative versus formative criticism. And since narratives can be viewed as extended examples from which the reader can extrapolate analogous situations projecting into the future, we bring to bear an examination of the patterns of thought and action undergirding each type of response: not only can we ask about the kinds of messages implied in ongoing reader response and whether Carver would have learned painstaking revision without a mentor to guide him, but we also can project into a future of writing

instruction focused exclusively on evaluation and can anticipate its consequences.

When all is said and done, the personal narrative is not problematic because of the limits of judgment to its validity claims; it is problematic because the uninterrogated and unevaluated personal narrative is seductive and, consequently, dangerous. As with all serious research, scholars are obligated to evaluate and to test narrative methods and findings.

A CALL FOR PERSONAL WRITING

As alternative methodologies emerge and attempt to gain disciplinary status, newer scholars are justifiably concerned that traditional standards of evidence function oppressively. Reading Reed Way Dasenbrock's "Truth and Method" as a call for a "standardizing method" of research practices, Pamela Caughie warns that dissenting or underrepresented voices are effectively silenced when they are made peripheral to standardized methods. Pointing out that feminism is not a set of practices or single methodology and that feminist resistance to set methodologies is part of its resistance to the hegemony of conventional approaches, she notes that demands for traditional forms of inquiry and measurement often mask the desire for nonpoliticized or conservative practices. Although I agree with Caughie, I believe that we should not be afraid to establish, in John S. Mebane's words, "contingently objective criteria of plausibility" or "reasonable standards of evidence" (537), for as Mebane argues, if those within the practice do not make this effort, standards will be imposed negatively from without.

Personal stories can be interrogated as argument and evidence by turning to Aristotle and to Aristotelian scholars of rhetoric. They remind us that although rhetoric deals with probability, "not all answers are equally valid." According to Raymond, "Aristotle assumed that there was a truth to be discovered through rhetoric . . . [His] *Rhetoric* is a philosophical assertion that some important questions cannot be answered by experimentation, or by logic, or by quantification because the data needed to make these methods work is unavailable. And yet, the questions must be resolved" (149). We will need to devise measures and means of analysis to evaluate claims derived from personal experience just as we have devised evaluative tools for other kinds of arguments. And because the use of the personal is within the domain of the rational, because narrative is indeed a way of thinking and a way of reasoning that has been in our human repertoire since earliest times, we should certainly be able to see that, although its form is not transparent, narrative too offers claims, reasons and evidence for serious analysis and critique.*

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