Beyond Shame:  
The Dialogic Narrative and Comic Cognition

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I’m trying to tell you something about my life  
Maybe give me insight between black and white  
The best thing you’ve ever done for me  
Is to help me take my life less seriously  
It’s only life, after all.

—“Closer to Fine”

When Kenneth Burke was in his early thirties and after more than a decade of marriage and three children, he fell in love with his wife’s sister. In his mind, he was surely not the sort to do something so foolish—yet there it was. He divorced his first wife, Lily Batterham, and married his second, Libbie. The Batterhams must have had some interesting conversations, as their brother, Forster, had only a few years before been left by his common-law wife Dorothy Day when she became the saintly and well-known founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. Indeed, all America in the 1930s could read about the Batterhams to some extent, because both Day and Burke wrote about their personal life “conversations”—Day in 1939 in her first autobiography, From Union Square to Rome, and Burke in 1932 in his novel Towards a Better Life. Day clearly wrote Union Square to generate interest in her movement; Burke later said that he wrote Towards a Better Life because he was too stubborn to see a psychoanalyst. Yet, it was not simply an expurgatory fiction; he told friends that they could find the essence of all his later theories in the book (Selzer 167, 207–08, 255). One way to approach critical consciousness of the world and one’s reactions to it is to begin as did Day and Burke, by

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telling the stories that shape one’s personal narrative of who one is—and why. By retelling the story of one’s life—shifting it from a heroic tragedy to an ironic comedy—one can develop a “perspective by incongruity,” as Burke wrote in his first critical work after his remarriage, that “violate[s] the ‘proprieties’ of the [concept] in its previous linkages” and transfers it to a new setting—breaking apart the unconsidered status quo and thus breaking open new considerations (Permanence 90).

We are a rhetorician, a psychologist, and a creative writer, purposely reexamining together the personal narrative as a necessary locus for the cognitive and emotional transformations occurring in late adolescence. We argue for a new kind of narrative, one more dialogic and thus pointing toward the potential implications of a critical consciousness that accepts its own inherently comic nature. Specifically, we will argue that the formal structure of personal narratives that we teach to our students could incorporate more rhetorical juxtaposition and discursive dialogue than the generic narratives most opponents of expressive writing find so clichéd. While Patricia Sullivan argues compellingly that teachers need to better read the real lessons of these quotidian essays, with their “predictable and conventional turns,” we examine current work in cognitive psychology to posit that teaching students to tell their stories more ambiguously and dialogically will not only help the (ennui-ridden) writing teacher, but also address the real cognitive growth issues going on in the young adult brain (45). We argue, in short, for what Burke called in Permanence and Change “the comic corrective”—an attitude that recognizes that one’s own perspectives are crafted by the interplay of self and society via language, and thus develops a charitable shrewdness toward the equally crafted perspectives of others. The comic corrective is the start of persuasion, Burke felt, because its ironic look at “certainties” allows for the possibility of change, the breaking open of new considerations.

What we propose weaves together insights from what Gary Olson has identified as the three historical definitions of composition: social science (especially psychology), humanism (especially creative writing), and critical theory (30). Together we view the interactions between self, others, and the communicative medium as necessary components of a
society that promotes dialogue, complexity, and generativity. We see these as developmental skills to be modeled and practiced in the writing classroom, with the expectation that telling—and retelling—one’s story contributes to both personal and social epistemology in a manner only newly becoming apparent to our respective fields. "If tragedy is said to ennoble people and comedy to cut people down to size, then the personal essay, with its ironic deflations, its insistence on human frailty, tilts toward the comic," notes Phillip Lopate in his introduction to The Art of the Personal Essay (xxviii). The comic as the starting point of social interaction, the place from which new perspectives are allowed to break open, is our aim.

The problems of building a pedagogy around personal narrative are well known, as students must focus on that from which they are least distant—self—and simultaneously make that experience relevant to others. Students too often leap to the conventional, or even subvert the intent of personal narrative by inventing a life, as Candace Spigelman notes—easier to rewrite some generic traumatic narrative than to delve into their own specific traumas. Other students prefer silence to the divulging of painful histories. Recent research into the ubiquitous feelings of shame that many psychologists believe are interwoven into all narratives further complicates the picture. We concede the difficulties of the approach. However, we argue (as do all these writers) that personal narrative has a place in the classroom, and a narrative pedagogy that formally instantiates perspective by incongruity, the breaking open of new considerations, can lead to precisely the cognitive and social benefits that are in line with critical pedagogy. We begin with recent understandings of the cognitive and emotional development occurring in students’ brains at the time most of them enter the college classroom; link that development to emotional and formal problems in writing the personal narrative and the role of narrative in meaning-making; discuss methods to create a pedagogy that enhances empathy and paradoxical insight; and end by considering how such a pedagogy may affect the goal of a critically conscious, cognitively complex understanding of self and world.
Unresolved Shame

As the bombshells of my daily fears explode
I try to trace them to my youth . . .
How long till my soul gets it right
Can any human being ever reach that kind of light?
—"Galileo"

Recent research indicates that young adults enter college with brains only newly capable of the complex thinking that will be required of them. Jay Giedd’s longitudinal magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) studies for the National Institutes of Mental Health have found a dramatic increase in adolescence of the synapses connecting the right and left brain hemispheres.\(^3\) Even though "total brain volume is about ninety-five percent of its adult size by the age of five years," much of the brain is essentially uncharted territory until the nerve synapses start forming—synapses that we might think of as connections through the gray matter. These increased connections "may reflect increased aptitude for higher-order cognitive abilities," writes Giedd (4). But aptitude is not ability—the increased synapses allow for a greater amount of information to enter the brain, but it is the use and re-use of the synapse paths that allows maturation to occur (Casey, Giedd, and Thomas 246). Some connections (synapse paths) get trodden continually and become superhighways; some are rarely or never used and disappear into the undergrowth. This translation of aptitude into ability by the rejection of certain paths and the attention to others is the learning that occurs precisely during the college years. This is our students’ brains on books (and discussions and labs and papers and internships—as well as the extracurricular learning of college-age life).

All that neural pruning takes place in the prefrontal cortex, the final part of the brain to fully develop. The prefrontal cortex has been associated with working memory, response inhibition, and attention allocation—three areas that might seem disparate. But brain researchers point out that "these functions may well be part of a single construct or common underlying circuitry" (245), in that focusing on one piece of information (in the past as memory or the present as attention) may well involve inhibiting other pieces that serve to distract us from our primary
focus. The memory of past events and attention to present ones may be overlapping brain functions in the prefrontal cortex, and both may be tied to a need not only to focus on one thing but to inhibit the focus on others, just as higher-order thinking seems to involve not just the use of neural connections but also their non-use.

Burke, speaking as a philosopher of language in a 1943 article, described this same focusing/inhibiting or use/non-use process as inevitably tied to our human need for speech expression. Humans, he said, "seek for vocabularies that will be faithful reflections of reality" (attention/use) by developing "vocabularies that are selections of reality" (inhibition/non-use) that sometimes "function as a deflection of reality" ("Tactics" I, 27). That is, for a language theorist, as for a brain researcher, all attention to what we decide is real involves a necessary inhibition of other, possible realities. It is the language theorist who points out the potential difficulty of all this inhibition: one's selections sometimes become a deflection of reality, as the (conscious or unconscious) decision to ignore certain possibilities limits perception to such an extent that we enhance our ignorance rather than our cognition.

Some psychologists believe that the main reason we may inhibit or deflect our perceptions of the world around us is because of an ubiquitous—but only recently studied—emotional phenomenon, unresolved shame. Although shame featured prominently as a motivator in Sigmund Freud's earliest work, institutional psychology only returned to it broadly in the 1970s, and many researchers have since found positive correlations between shame and a range of mental health problems. Theorist Gershen Kaufman's frequently cited description says that shame is "to feel seen in a painfully diminished sense. The self feels exposed to itself and to anyone else present. Shame is an impotence-making experience" (Psychology 8). Shame appears to be innate—Silvan Tompkins found that physiological reactions we associate with shame responses (casting down eyes and head, averted gaze, overall slumping of the body posture) are present even in infants. But this hard-wired innate response becomes explicitly tied to shame only with the development of language, says researcher David Cook: the child experiences physiological shame in response to an angry parent, for instance, and at the same time thinks "I am bad when I do that" (Horak 19).
Shame motivates because it is a "master emotion." It is not experienced in the same way as other emotions because there is no distance. "I am sad" is a momentary feeling; "I am bad" is a state of being, an ontological commentary. Thus, when one experiences a shame response, it is impossible to distinguish between "having" the response and "being" the response. Shame defenses, then, are quickly activated, even in mature people, as the memory of the past shame event is triggered by some (even tangentially related) present occurrence. Once again, memory and attention overlap to produce (re)action. Unresolved, the shame experience becomes intertwined with one's sense of self, such that eventually no input at all from the present world is needed to activate it—the memory associations are enough. As shame theorist Donald Nathanson describes it, "Through shame we are forced to know and remember our failures. . . . Shame produces awareness of an incompetent self" (210–11). In the terms we have been employing, shame interferes with the ability to inhibit one's focus on certain pathways. It forces attention onto past memories rather than present situations, and thus it conditions one's responses. People entwined in shame are deflected from a response to the present reality by a memory-laden response to a past stimulus, such that their response does not reflect reality as those around them might perceive it.

**Personal Narrative as Therapeutic**

So I just sit up in the house and resist  
And not be seen until I cease to exist  
A kind of conscientious objection  
A kind of dodging the draft.  
—"Least Complicated"

The ubiquity of shame and its interference with attention to present reality, we argue, often leads students to precisely those uncomfortable and inappropriate expressions that have caused many compositionists to abandon the personal narrative as a pedagogical tool. Teachers who do advocate personal narrative today, therefore, often link it explicitly to a more psychotherapeutic classroom, such as that recently advocated for in Jeffrey Berman's *Risky Writing*, in which the teacher "affirm[s] self-
esteem and personal growth[,] . . . the therapeutic benefits of self-expression” (48–49). Judith Harris’ Signifying Pain likewise “advocates teaching confessional writing as a means to . . . ‘[help] liberate the unconscious’ since ‘it is its own kind of censor’” (qtd. in Bauer 217–18). “Psychoanalytic pedagogy,” Harris argues in “Re-Writing the Subject,” “shows the benefits of personal writing as linked to improvements in both writing and social consciousness” (181). Both writers believe that trauma inhibits memory and, therefore, a more validating classroom encourages students to write out of their pain and affirm their experiences as a site of true healing. Yet, as Dale Bauer comments in her sensitive review for JAC, “I’m not one of the ‘dubious’ or ‘unreasonable’ postmodern educators who Berman scolds for their doubt, but I am wondering how many teachers could pull this off” (215).

The psychologist on our writing team vigorously nods his head. Horak’s study of couples in therapy has found that persons feeling large amounts of shame are more likely to experience present-day relationship distress (55). These highly shamed individuals are some of the most difficult to work with, even for professionals in therapeutic practice, for they respond with a mix of blame and shame toward self and others as negative memories interfere with their ability to empathize, develop a capacity for intimacy, and forge relationships. If writing is therapy, the college writing classroom is an almost inevitable locus of further stress, and further pain, for students forced to examine shameful memories for a grade given by instructors trained not in psychology but in writing pedagogy. Indeed, as Brooks Bouson has significantly noted, English scholars themselves inhabit a tension-filled “shame/pride culture,” and they frequently relate to each other in a blame and shame cycle infused with power/control dynamics. The academic environment itself, in other words, may well limit academics’ ability to provide a true healing relationship to their students. The responses to Bouson in JAC highlight this tension: Eileen Schell’s list of specific loci within English departments where such tensions flare (and can, perhaps, be addressed), and Jeffrey Di Leo’s call for increased theoretical attention to the emotional life of the academy in order to improve the “politics of emotion” among working faculty (233) demonstrate the need to address the shame/pride culture of academia.
While we believe that Berman and Harris are correct in their assessment of unresolved trauma as a major issue, therefore, we do not ourselves here advocate personal narrative pedagogy as a therapeutic measure. We advocate the pedagogy as a cognitive measure and a means to address through narrative form the often palpable student resistance to critical contemplation of their own perspectives and (thus) the empathetic contemplation of others’. Generativity suffers when past shame is unresolved. In adolescents only newly forming the potential neural pathways allowing for openness to new ideas and identification with others, then, a critical pedagogy emphasizing these traits may well fail if unaddressed shameful memories too strongly inhibit the students’ ability to focus on present relationship-development. That is, while the telling of one’s story may bring shameful experiences to the fore, avoiding these uncomfortable situations only leads to the protective need to “cover up” one’s felt vulnerability with defense mechanisms that do not promote critical empathy.

Indeed, many psychologists now believe that it is precisely through the telling of personal narratives—particularly during the college-going years—that young people develop that all-important sense of who they are in the world and what reality they inhabit. Dan McAdams, a key theorist in the new field of narrative psychology, says that in late adolescence—precisely at the time when the prefrontal cortex is developing the ability to focus attention on some selections of reality and inhibit attention toward others—young adults start to “manufacture [their] dramatic personal myths by selectively mining some experiences and neglecting or forgetting others” (qtd. in Flora 61). While young teens create fanciful myths of themselves, McAdams says, college-aged teens are developing the realistic narratives that will shape their sense of who they are as they enter adulthood. They shape these narratives by selecting certain events in their past and crafting these events into a meaningful story that “explains” their self to their self (Flora 62). “Identity is that internalized and evolving story that results from this selective appropriation of past, present, and future,” says McAdams (486). These narratives demonstrate the overlap between past memory and present attention, as who we were then figures more and more prominently into any sense of who we are now.
McAdams believes that most Americans tend to fashion their stories to fit into one of two generic categories: the “redemption sequence” moving from negative to positive experiences (*life was hard but I fought through it and made it*) or the “contamination sequence” moving in the opposite direction (*everything was great until it all went awry and nothing has ever been the same*) (McAdams and Bowman 5). For those individuals telling their stories as contamination sequences, the present is experienced as an “endless repetition of negative past” (22), to which they often react, as Horak’s research found, with a mix of internalized shame and externalized blame. Their inability to inhibit memory’s impact on their present status makes them “seem unable to grow, to progress” into the future (23). While not all narrative psychologists agree with McAdams’ generic narratives, one clear aspect of this new field is the importance of past upon present, as well as the “crafted’ aspect of each person’s life narrative.” In fact, many narrative and developmental psychologists go further than McAdams in saying that while young adulthood is the first time personal narratives are crafted, people continue to revise their past story to make sense of their developing present-day self.

The creation of identity-forging stories may be an ongoing response to changing life circumstances—“identity exists as a product of the imagination,” in McAdams and Bowman’s memorable phrase. However, the raw materials for these crafted stories do, of course, occur in real life, and, according to memory researchers, the events occur most frequently in the teenage and young adult years—the college years. Psychologist David Rubin has found that, from middle age on, people remember most clearly those events that happened between the ages of ten and thirty (Flora 62). During the college years and immediately afterwards, “narrative identity”—the sense of self informed by one’s narrative—is most strongly forged. The older the person, the more fixed her narrative identity, which is to say the more her stories have been crafted and she tells the same ones to explain the significance of who she is. In contrast, the narratives of young adults “are still in flux. If you ask college students to tell you their most important memories, and then surprise them six months later by asking again, they will repeat stories at a rate of just 12 percent,” according to memory researcher Avril Thorne (62). Thus, it is
precisely during the college years, as neural pathways are becoming either superhighways or forgotten paths, that narrative patterns can be established that either trap people in "the endless repetition of negative past" or allow them to forge an identity moving them into the future. As McAdams puts it,

With respect to storytelling and the stories people tell to make sense of their own lives, therefore, something rather dramatic happens in late adolescence and young adulthood. At that time, the person first confronts the problem of unity and purpose in human life: Who am I? How do I fit into the adult world? How do I construct a unified and purposeful life as an adult? Cognitively, emotionally, and interpersonally, people are not prepared to address these kinds of questions until they are on the brink of adulthood. (485)

Reexamining Narrative Structure

But then again it feels like some sort of inspiration
To let the next life off the hook
Or she'll say look what I had to overcome from my last life
I think I'll write a book.

—"Galileo"

It is possible, then, that teaching narrative may help students craft their memories—pruning and shaping their mix of positive and negative experiences—into identities that allow for precisely the kinds of cognitive and emotional growth necessary in college for critical thinking and generativity. Amy Robillard argues that narrative provides students with the agency to develop their own critical identity without adopting uncritically the academic master narrative. However, as she points out with Lynn Bloom, the writing classroom is itself a middle-class institution promoting a middle-class form advocating not past-examination but future-orientation and not closure but "what if?" (90). We fall on the bias, arguing with psychology for a past scrutiny to allow for future growth and with creative writing for an open-ended stance to promote more comprehensive insight. We believe, however, that while some critical essays may indeed demand a what if stance from students, what Paul Heilker calls the "thesis/support form" of the typical college essay is more likely to
facilitate "the closing rather than the opening of [students'] minds" (3). He argues for a pedagogy of the (narrative) essay for precisely this reason—the opening of student minds—but we believe that the generic form of the standard personal narrative (particularly within an institutional setting, as Meiners and Sanabria discuss) still too often inhibits such nuanced crafting.

The standard personal narrative, demanding as it does an implicit or explicit thesis—an epiphany—is too easy for students to mimic superficially. The narrative genre insists that the student's personal experience be not merely personal but also meaningful, pushing students toward too-quick "revelations" of conventional wisdom and ideological clichés. If students write about personal experiences that leave them full of dissonance, they may not be cognitively ready to discern their own insight about that experience, and in desperation they may fall back on aphorisms overheard from parents, teachers, churches, daytime talk-shows, self-help books, or Hallmark cards. "And so I learned that God gives us nothing we can't handle." "I realized that education was the only way I'd get ahead." "It seemed tragic then, but it's made me stronger." "After all, what doesn't kill us, cures us." A student can explore a personally dissonant subject and by exploring it move forward in understanding, even derive a thesis statement, but there is no guarantee the student will be at a psychological juncture to do so in any complex way.

To address this formal obstacle to narrative meaning-making, we therefore are suggesting a two-fold pedagogic reexamination of the traditional narrative structure to help students reach beyond the self and its unitary life-lesson. First is a more rhetorically juxtaposed form for the personal narrative, attending to the inherently persuasive nature of any story and the impact of form on this audience-persuading process. Second is a more discursively dialogic form for the personal narrative, one that celebrates rather than suppresses the dissonance of competing perspectives with no clear unitary resolution. These two recommendations together embody the attitude that Burke labeled the comic corrective. If people recognized the craftedness of their own perspectives, Burke thought, they might better recognize that their assertions (the meanings they draw from these perspectives) were also "necessarily socialized by revision" (Permanence 341). Such a realization, in Burke's terms, "pro-
vides the charitable attitude toward people that is required for purposes of persuasion and cooperation, but at the same time maintains our shrewdness concerning the simplicities of ‘cashing in’ (Attitudes 166). If others’ assertions are “socialized,” then persuasion is possible, if one is willing to shape one’s (equally socialized) assertions into a persuasive form. In other words, while attention to audience in narrative is often construed by students as the need to tell their personal epiphany, a comic persuasion shows alternative perspectives to the audience in a manner that encourages their engagement in exploring options together.

First, then, a rhetorically conscious personal narrative can address the needs of its audience—and the propensity of student writers to move too quickly to superficial convention and aphorism—by incorporating Burke’s juxtaposed model for form. In Counter-Statement, Burke argues that “form” is audience-centered. It is “the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite”—a satisfaction which involves “a temporary set of frustrations, but in the end these frustrations prove to be simply a more involved kind of satisfaction,” making the resolution “more intense” (31). The form of a narrative, then, is determined not by the psychology of the writer or protagonist but by that of the audience as it is manipulated and aroused. Specifically, the narrative appeals by the cultivation of the audience’s appetite for change and reversal—“the presence of one quality [calling] forth the demand for another” (38). If the reader has had a big dose of “sultriness, or oppression,” then the reader will crave a “cold, fresh northwind” (39). If the reader has had a big dose of cold north winds, the reader will crave sultriness. Neither condition is attractive in isolation; rather, these conditions interest the reader only in a pattern of point and counterpoint arriving at a crescendo.

Monroe, our creative writer, has often used this form in her own semi-autobiographical short stories. The novella opening her collection A Wild, Cold State, for instance, begins with the narrator imagining entering the belly of a giant fish in the middle of her small hometown and ends with her imagining flying away above a frozen lake, while throughout the middle she wavers between connection and freedom. Readers at the end might wish for her freedom, but it is not at all certain that such escape will make her any happier. Peter Brooks suggested in 1984 that narrative is the
psychoanalytic "desire for the ending," with "the beginning of plot as the introduction of desire, the middle as deferral and delay, largely through repetition in its satisfaction, and the end as the satisfactory discharge of the tension built up through that arousal and delay" (Phelan 26). The subject, for both Burke and Brooks, is formed into a shape that creates specific desires in the audience, draws them out, and then satisfies them. The persuasive narrative is therefore far from a chronological retelling of events. Elizabeth Gilbert's recent travel memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*, for example, shapes the chronology of a year into three quite distinct experiences, and the reader inhabits with the author three countries and three unique purposes for being there, guided in each by an authorial voice that changes dramatically with each new scene. As Peter Elbow writes recently, the "well-planned sequence of yearnings and reliefs, itches and scratches" that entails form is what provides "the energy... that binds written words together so as to pull us along from one part to the next and to make us feel that all the parts are held together" (625-26).

In Burke's formulation, it is not readers' desire to know what happens next that binds the text, but their desire to know what properly goes with what that binds words in new ways. Burke's is a theory of form that begins from an incongruous premise: that the writer's self is interesting to a reader only if it is arranged in a pattern of opposing states leading to a crescendo. This is different from the story being interesting to the writer him/herself. McAdams notes that, because each "life deviates from convention in some manner," it contains "the individualistic elements that make it worth telling"—but, as any would-be published author knows, "worth telling" is not the same as "worth reading" (483). Arranging one's story into something worth reading via a pattern of opposing states means considering the feelings and desires of audience not for information but for juxtaposed proprieties. Burke's example of this juxtaposed form is the delayed appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost, who arrives, after several false scares, only as Hamlet begins soberly discussing the excessive drinking of the Danes. "All this time we had been waiting for a ghost, and it comes at the one moment which was not pointing towards it" (*Counter-Statement* 30). In more academic prose, Jane Hindman models the juxtaposed form (as well as dialogic, which we
discuss below) in her wonderfully ambiguous examination of personal agency, "Making Writing Matter: Using 'The Personal' to Recover[y] an Essential[ist] Tension in Academic Discourse." After two pages of heavily academic prose concluding with an assertion of her thesis in reasoned counterpoint to an essay by Min-Zahn Lu, Hindman suddenly breaks into her own text, insisting "No, no. This is not the way to make things clear" (90). After a brief argument from her "inner voice," the text continues with a public confessional ("My name's Jane E and I'm an alcoholic") that dialogues with the academic to explore Hindman's understanding of agency and offers readers the chance to juxtapose the complementary narratives of "Professor Hindman" and "Jane E" until they unite in a more-than-private-less-than-abstract voice of (ambiguous) conclusion.

In the writing classroom, Burke's formal model forces students to think outside what they already know as they consider how their experience will translate to the audience, not merely to the self. This audience awareness, this rhetorical empathy, is admittedly a cognitive challenge to students in such a narcissistic stage of development, but as Giedd's work reminds us, even the attempt to consider audience is a crucial beginning to building the synaptic pathways of maturity. Juxtaposed texts are the remembrance "that [one's] assertions are necessarily socialized by [the] revision" of thrust and counter-thrust, itch and scratch, that give energy to the textually reshaped raw materials of one's story.

The second formal reconsideration of the "new narrative" is a celebration of dialogic truths and unresolved endings. As Mikhail Bakhtin famously noted, modern fiction is predicated on a multiplicity of competing voices in unresolved dialogue, but this quality is rarely encouraged in the story-telling genre of the personal narrative. Dialogic narratives, however, may lead students in a writing classroom toward the exact kinds of cognitive and ethical skills necessary for modern social interaction. As Giedd's research has found, humans successfully adapting to a complex society need a longer period of brain maturation than their hunter/gatherer ancestors—they need time and space to form more neural pathways before undergoing a too-hasty abandoning of options. Thus, a formal structure that prolongs students' exploration of a variety of possible cognitive options may well lead to greater success at complex
thought. "The key to all of that is having the plasticity built into the brain," as Giedd notes (qtd. in Kotulak 21).

A non-dialogic narrative, with its formal demand for epiphany, may discourage students from potential growth. If the selection of language to reflect one's reality is rushed, one's selections can instead become a deflection, limiting perception. Thomas Newkirk has written insightfully of the underlying premise of both expressivist and socio-epistemic classrooms that students will be "transformed" by their writing, and that this transformation will occur in distinct moments of self-realization—or as he quotes his teenage daughter asking, "How many of these life-changing experiences am I supposed to have?" (263–65). Dialogic narrative holds in abeyance the formal need for these transformational moments, and instead invites the conversation of multiple perspectives that can lead to more nuanced conclusions, or conclusions that—like those of the modern short story—are stylistically satisfying without the need for clear epiphany. Indeed, dialogic personal narrative may well be the ideal form for such conversations: narrative theorist Jerome S. Bruner posits that the ability to hold ambiguous perspectives simultaneously is a key component of what he calls the "narrative mode of thought," as contrasted with the more scientifically oriented "paradigmatic mode" in which one strives toward a single unitary truth. In the narrative mode, which Bruner argues is the preferred way to make meaning of human interactions, the goal of the meaning-making is not to find the one truth but instead to "open up new possibilities, to widen the horizon of life experience"—to promote, in other words, the comic corrective (McAdams 480). In this light, it is not surprising that Hindman's conclusion to her juxtaposed, dialogic essay is that personal writing does not "construct unconditional arguments that resolve contradictions beyond a reasonable doubt," while it still provides readers with the kinds of insightful new understandings that her own essay demonstrates (106). This ambiguous insight of multiple perspectives is the goal of the dialogic classroom.

Finally, telling one's story in dialogue, from competing perspectives, may lead to the growth in empathy that is a key component of psychosocial development in the early adult years. Developmental psychologists such as Robert Keegan would caution teachers that, no matter how well-crafted their lesson plans or assignments, not all late adolescents can be
expected to have reached a developmental stage in which they are capable of a deeper understanding of self and other. Giedd’s research adds, however, that the neurological growth needed to undertake such leaps is established only with practice, so that even the attempt at competing perspectives begins to build facility. Students confronted with the doubly new possibilities of both late adolescent psychological development and a liberal arts education may be in particular need of the comic outlook encouraged by narrative thought.

Finding Juxtaposed Moral Complexity

There’s more than one answer to these questions
Pointing me in a crooked line
The less I seek my source for some definitive
The closer I am to fine.

—“Closer to Fine”

Building on her work in creative writing classrooms, then, Monroe suggests a multistep process for teaching models of juxtaposed truths in composition classrooms. Students may be helped at first to find the juxtaposed moral complexity in an essay read for class, such as Es’kai Mphahlele’s very personal essay “African Literature: What Tradition?” in which he admits to being seduced by the western education the mission schools offered him, his desire for such education becoming an addiction that compelled him to sign away his heritage, his gods, his family traditions. To teach this essay as dialogic juxtaposition would be to emphasize that Mphahlele presents his education, and ultimately his vocation, as both a blessing and a curse, with this dissonance about what has been gained and what has been sacrificed left unresolved. The dissonance in Mphahlele’s essay goes to the roots of the word “ambivalence”—two opposing sets of values that coexist simultaneously. Just as the ambidextrous person has dexterity with opposite hands, so ambivalence implies a frame of mind in which opposite values work simultaneously, one never dominating or superceding the other.

This dialogic juxtaposition works as well on less personal essays, as for example Octavio Paz’s competing views of “The Art of the Fiesta.”
Paz concedes that the fiesta seems, to foreign eyes, a festival of procrastination and excess, a pagan squandering of wealth to appease jealous gods, and therefore an amalgamation of the worst stereotypes about Mexico. Yet, he also argues that the fiesta temporarily breaks down reified social structures as the rich and powerful commingle with the poor, and breaks down a utilitarian conception of time as a productive, teleological sequence because, during fiesta, time exists as the present only. Paz therefore acknowledges the violence and excess and waste, even as he insists on its necessity: the need to revolt from material and temporal goals which never materialize for most of the population. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir's "Woman as Other" blames women's dependent status on both sexes, arguing that even if women's role were not built into the intellectual history of the western world as written by men, women are also complicit in their status as other because they thereby evade economic and metaphysical responsibility for their existence.

Any well-written essay will work as long as the teacher teaches students to perceive an essay's logic as one set of values or ideas competing against but also accommodating seemingly opposite values and ideas. A single, uncontested perspective arrives at only the most glib "truth." In short, it is the teacher's responsibility to show students that good logic is never monologic.

From these models, students may begin to write their own stories into escalating juxtapositions that let ambivalence exist without resolution and acknowledge that coercion and complicity are always symbiotic. The directions a teacher might give to encourage student self-dialogue include:

To consider an experience about which they have unresolved feelings or a lack of certainty (the type of experience that especially calls forth the narrative, rather than paradigmatic, mode of thinking).

To either: (a) draft two narratives about the experience, each of which embraces just one of the sides of the issue (one voice, one perspective); or (b) free-write an argument with themselves about the experience and then parse the dissonant, ambivalent components into competing camps.
To then craft an essay in which the competing components from each side of the self-argument alternate and vie with each other in a crescendo of perspectives leading to an ending that synthesizes wisdom from both. This synthesis, like the ending of the contemporary short story, would not aim to be definitive but ambivalent, perhaps even unresolved.

As Burke wrote in *A Grammar of Motives*, the end of any dialogic interplay is ironic rather than pure, in that a dialogic certainty "requires that all the sub-certainties be considered as neither true nor false, but contributory" to the end idea (513). Lopate suggests that a professional narrative is "the voice of middle age," in part due to its emphasis on ironic detachment (xxxvi). This is not, however, the irony of the comic corrective, where multiple perspectives engage with rather than detach from one another. It is this engagement which young adults are newly mastering.

Later assignments can ask students to practice the same method—write two competing versions of the same narrative, then draft a synthesis of these two—on more political, or publicly historical, subjects. Students can analyze two of the sides of a historical debate for the points at which they diverge and (later) converge. When students repeat the exercise with a contemporary debate with which they feel personally engaged, they are better able to move beyond their initial opinions of the "right" and "wrong" of each perspective and see the "socialized revisions" of both. Thus, their personal perspective on what they believe is "right" becomes more nuanced as they increase their critical empathy for alternate perspectives—their "charity" and "shrewdness," to use Burke's terms.

Such assignments are standard fare for the writing classroom aiming for critical consciousness. But as Harris and narrative psychologists emphasize, it is the initial sharing of personal narratives, rather than the immediate jump to social issues, that can mark the beginning of "a process of overcoming distance rather than creating it, moving what was Other, through our understanding of their independent selfhood and experience, into relation with us" (Josselson qtd. in McAdams 490). As college students enter the classroom just beginning the developmental processes that lead them toward generativity, a pedagogy of dialogic narratives encourages through form those first attempts at seeing outside the self.

One can see, then, why Burke would insist that the remembrance that
assertions are revised realities would encourage patience: the pattern of point and counterpoint, voice and counter-voice, leading to crescendo is not only aesthetically appealing to an audience; it also forces students to explore the antithesis of their ready-made thesis, the counterpoint to their obvious main point, not just to counter it but to identify with it as well. It facilitates cognitive growth by formally demanding that students explore a perspective alien to the one they think they already know. It facilitates, in other words, the comic corrective that forges new linkages in an atmosphere of tolerance.

Countering Shame through Dialogic Narrative

And there's always retrospect (when you're looking back)  
To light a clearer path  
Every five years or so I look back on my life  
And I have a good laugh.  
—"Watershed"

We began this article discussing the cognitive growth of the late adolescent years and the inhibiting role that unresolved shame so often plays in warping attention to past memories and consequently limiting present-day perspectives. We argued that dialogic, audience-aware narratives are a formal means toward building the complex cognitive skills necessary for students to broaden their perspectives and begin to empathize with the perspectives of others. We argue further that such narratives are a formal means toward helping students begin to process the shame that otherwise motivates them to resist the generativity expected of them as successfully maturing young adults. We want to emphasize that we are not suggesting teachers force or even encourage students to write about shameful moments. As Anne Ruggles Gere has argued, giving students the power to be self-concealing should always be an option, although Lynn Bloom’s countering caution, that the disempowered need encouragement to hear their own voices, is an important balance, and perhaps both positions are straddled by Wendy Hesford’s observation that the disempowered gain agency by selecting when/how to speak or be silent. If students do choose to explore traumas, however, there are three ways that the formal
requirements of a dialogic, juxtaposed narrative may allow for a more nuanced, less purely emotive response.

First, the practice of shaping one's "raw materials" into a rhetorically persuasive narrative increases the present-day agency of the student writer. As the events in one's memory are shaped for a current purpose, the event-experiencer of the past becomes the story-teller focused on the present. A variety of composition theorists (see Bloom and Hesford, for example) have echoed what psychologist Edna Foa, a specialist in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, has found in her narrative work with rape survivors: the powerless "victim" in the past memory recedes as the powerful storyteller gains control over the present unfolding of the event (85). The trap of negative memory can become the vein one taps—and rechannels—for present-day understanding and persuasion of others. As Timothy Richardson puts it in his Lacanian analysis of trauma, "the [past] event as traumatic becomes an object called into being for some current (condensing, displacing) function" (493). Like the cultural studies classroom, the narrative classroom seeks to increase students' awareness of the constructedness of their perspectives, yet it includes the student among those entities potentially capable of such social construction.

Second, the dialogic process of multi-voiced writing encourages students to engage more fully other perspectives that they had hitherto only glossed. If shame is "to feel seen in a painfully diminished sense," then imagining more fully the perspectives of those who are doing the "seeing"—particularly when that consideration is controlled by the author-agent—may enable a more realistic, more tolerant view toward one's own felt ineptitude. Asking students to attempt to step outside their own innate narcissism, in other words, may allow them to begin to see themselves as less the sole object of (negative) attention. As Laura Micciche has noted, excluding the affective realm from discussions of action and persuasion leaves scholars with the notion that motivations are merely rational, and this oversight is both mistaken and dangerous (164). When Burke in 1939 reviewed Adolph Hitler's personal narrative, My Struggle, he quoted at length Hitler's description of his shame at his inability as a young man to adequately debate the Jewish intellectuals of turn-of-the-century Vienna. Hitler praised their verbal dexterity, admitting that they beat him continually as he attempted to formulate his
thoughts, and then he added chillingly, "I gradually began to hate them" (qtd. in Burke "Rhetoric" 6). What Burke saw textually on the eve of the Holocaust was the horrifying danger of a shame response unengaged by social intervention, unable to laugh patiently at the foibles of self or others.

Psychologist Helen Lewis calls shame a "feeling trap," in which individuals have emotional responses to their own emotional responses in what can become a long loop of affect (Scheff 95). Paradoxically, to break out of the loop requires more than an individualistic response because shame is an inherently social emotion—what Kaufman calls both an individual and a cultural phenomenon (Shame 191). Shame, which is created in a relational context, can only be healed in a relationship. It is the threat of alienation, loss of meaningful contact, that so inspires individuals to avoid it, and this inner/outer duality, this need to work through who one is as seen by others may well have motivated some of the more powerful pieces of autobiographical narrative, sharing one's story with strangers or as Burke put it, writing to avoid the analyst. Narrative writers recognize that recuperation of social identification is what can most counter the inhibiting power of shame—and social identification begins with the ability to put oneself in dialogue with the perspectives of others.

Finally, then, the acceptance of ongoing dissonance rather than one single epiphany makes the dialogic narrative ironic, comic, and comedy reminds humanity that, rather than living in the crisis of alienation subject to the social threat of shame and blame, it is much more likely to be living in relationship. As Burke wrote in a 1935 review, "one might roughly distinguish the tragic from the comic by saying that the tragic deals with man in nature, while the picture of man in society is comic" ("Recent" 168). Indeed, as far back as Aristotle's Poetics, the comic is set up as a social cure to the pain of shame (the Attic Greek aischos and its derivatives). Unlike tragedy, Aristotle wrote, in comedy the self is flawed and distorted, but the pain—the internal response to others' gaze—is gone (1449a). One is no longer the tragic hero brought low by inevitable fate, but simply the comic fool, clambering back up to try again. Burke tied this charity toward self to a charity toward others when he wrote,

The progress of human enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as vicious, but as mistaken. When you add that
people are necessarily mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle. (Attitudes 41)

A dialogic narrative acknowledges the possibility that, while one’s story is a critical component of one’s epistemology, there are multiple ways of telling the story, multiple voices contributing to its reality, and multiple meanings to be drawn from it. This “comic corrective” may be a particularly important lesson for the still-developing minds of the young adults populating our classrooms, but it is important as well for those of us concerned about addressing the destructive cycle of shame and blame in the world beyond the classroom walls. As Dale Jacobs has written in arguing for a pedagogy of critical hope, if “we see the world as unfinished and open to revision,” then we are better equipped to work for change (794).

Burke spent much of his career working out the consequences of his understanding that language shapes humanity’s ability to see the world as finished or unfinished. In the effort to discuss language as symbolic action, he mastered concepts from literary theory, linguistics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy (among others), and produced lengthy tomes now standard in modern rhetoric. But his ideas, as he insisted, all began in his attempts to work out “the trouble” in his personal life with the reshaped retelling of his own fictionalized narrative, Towards a Better Life. For us three authors, attempting to master insights across the fields of rhetoric, psychology, and creative writing, the far-reaching, ambivalently comic insight he achieved from this personalized beginning points toward the critical cognitive and psychosocial potential of the practice of personal narrative.

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Notes

1. All song lyrics are by the Indigo Girls and from their official website.
2. We would like to thank Dennis Lynch for his insightful and extensive comments on an early draft of this article, as well as the anonymous reviewers at JAC.
3. Specifically, the corpus callosum, the small but major nerve connection at the center of the brain that links the largely separate right and left hemispheres, undergoes substantial synaptic growth that peaks at around age fourteen for boys and eleven for girls (Giedd; Kotulak 21).
4. As Casey, Giedd, and Thomas note:

   How do we ignore and select from competing sources of information (stimulus selection), or from competing response alternatives (response selection), or for that matter, ignore or inhibit a behavior or response altogether (response execution)? . . . To what extent psychological constructs are unique or overlapping (e.g. memory and inhibition) may in part be determined by whether these functions have overlapping or unique regions of brain activity. (244, 246)
5. In light of Kaufman’s “impotence-making experience,” it is interesting to note philosopher Bernard Williams’ comment that aidoia, a derivative of the archaic Greek aidōs—shame—is commonly used for genitals (78). Shame, thus, was literally the exposure of our private parts.
6. Another recent approach to the personal narrative, writing as activism, positions writers as subjugated peoples telling their stories to impact public policy. This is the “giving voice to the voiceless” approach described by Anne Ruggles Gere and numerous others, including most recently Higgins and Brush in their report on work with welfare recipients, which has some affiliation to our approach. In consideration of space, though, we leave for others the very real role writing can play in mitigating the stigma faced by marginalized peoples in extracurricular settings.
7. And indeed, McAdams and Bowman also note that “even the most tightly drawn life narrative can suggest thematic lines that run counter to the story’s dominant thrust” (9). The “redemption sequence,” for example, is given an interesting twist by Meiners and Sanabria as they discuss its generic dominance among the incarcerated individuals they teach.
8. In Aristotle’s Poetics, “…alla tou aischrou esti to geloion morion. To gar geloion estin hamartėma ti kai aischos anðunon kai ou phthartikon, hoion euthus to geloion prosòpon aischron ti kai diestrammenon aneu odunès”—the shame-causing (aischrou) caused laughter, anyone’s miscalculation caused laughter, and shame (aischos) was free from pain and not destructive, much like the shame-causing mask (prosòpon aischron) of the comedy that distorted without pain (1449a, trans. Weiser’s).


Harris, Judith. “Re-Writing the Subject: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Creative Writing and Composition Pedagogy.” *College English* 64 (2001): 175–204.


