I feel this society somewhere has lost its sense of what art is. Art is expression. In expression you need 100% full freedom and our freedom to express our art is seriously being fucked with. Fuck, the word fuck has as many connotations as does the word Art and I'm far beyond the point of sitting down and casually complaining about this problem to the right wing control freaks who are the main offenders of destroying art. I wont calmly and literally complain to you! I'm going to fucking kill. I'm going to fucking destroy your macho, sadistic, sick, right wing, religiously abusive opinions on how we as a whole should operate according to your conditions. Before I die many will die with me and they will deserve it. See you in Hell. Love, Kurdt Cobain. (110-111)

Among other things, Kurt Cobain’s Journals proves an interesting composition textbook, one geared more for teachers, perhaps, than students, because it reminds us what to look for in writing and, hence, what to have college writers look at in order to help them develop voice and content in their prose. I’m thinking, for example, of Jim Corder’s dark night of the soul in 1975, coming face to face with his worst nightmare: namely, the writing assignments he gave his students. Corder writes how, “in an excess of zeal during the first meeting of my freshman composition class, I vowed that I would write an essay every time they did and that I would turn my essays over to them as they turned theirs in to me” (163). Realization quickly sickens him; his panic-moment comes at his desk one evening, looking at an assignment due the next day (like his students, he waited until the night before to start on it): “I know how to write this thing,” I remember saying to myself, ‘but why

Geoffrey Sirc works in composition at the University of Minnesota, General College.
in the hell would anybody want to?” (165). Cobain understands this lament; as he put it in a journal entry entitled “The late 1980’s”:

\[\text{you get the overall feeling that you paid way too much for literally nothing stimulating.}\] \(\text{\textsuperscript{5}}\)

If writing teachers today looked back on their courses, late at night, through unblinking eyes, what would they see? I’d like to think a bit about Composition’s eye—what it sees, what it looks for, and what it has students attend to—in order to reflect on the stuff of our writing courses. Corder and Cobain are important here because of the technology of representation: what tool do you need to capture the vision you want to record? If, as Walter Benjamin claims, underlying every representational technology is a certain way of seeing (Selected Writings 238), then we need to wonder what sort of vision Cobain’s medium (the journal) might be able to capture that Corder’s (the college essay) can’t.

Composition’s sight these days involves a perfect economy: what one reads is what one writes, and vice versa. What a student views isn’t actual so much as it is textual. Textbooks seem like the intellectual equivalent of circuit training, with students passing from station to station, exercising their discernment. Students using Robert Atwan’s book, Convergences, for example, spend time on the widely-used Judith Ortiz Cofer machine, where the workout involves reflection on the following:

Why does Cofer emphasize the silence of the home movie? What role does “silence” play in her essay? How frequently does she refer to the way things sound? What connections does she establish between seeing and hearing? Between visuals and vocals? (35)

An engagement with life is defined as an engagement with text because, as Atwan claims, we are teaching “a new kind of reader, one who must respond to a constant stream of images, words, and ideas. To create thoughtful, effective texts of their own, students need to become critical consumers of method, message, and medium” (vii). This, of course, is an update of Bartholomae and Petrosky’s influential Ways of Reading approach, where the first-year course becomes one “where students are given the opportunity to work on what they read, and to work on it by writing. . . . There is no better place to work on reading than in a writing course” (v). The pedagogy in a Convergences-type course, one taking a reading-based, cultural studies approach, involves viewing writing as a series of conceptual exercises designed to produce critical media consumption. The concern, then, isn’t really with optics, but rather analytics; not ways of seeing, but ways of reading. Rather than see, students are asked to re-see. Composition’s perennial insistence on revision, the twice-baked, is
now put to use in re-capturing the history of previous textual engagements, as a way for students to create their own thoughtful, effective texts: “map out . . . [and] trace the analytical process other writers, thinkers, and artists have followed” (Atwan vii-viii). Students don’t chart new realms as much as re-plot once-taken journeys. Such a pedagogy would define students as canny critics, but the mere idea of forcing students through some textbook writer’s pre-selected, pre-sequenced series of Important Texts, scaffolding the ordeal with a series of Reading Questions designed to ensure proper textual reception, is degrading, infantilizing. For some compositionists, this would be unthink-able. Underlying James Moffett’s curricular vision, for example, was a deeply humanist spirituality, and so he rejected attempts at the textual conscription of students:

The first step toward spiritual education is to put students in a stance of responsible decision-making and in an unprogrammed interaction with other people and the environment. As part of this change I would drop textbooks in favor of trade books, a syllabus in favor of a classroom library, and go strongly for individual and small-group reading. Any specific presenting and sequencing of texts, whether done in the editorial offices of amoral corporations or within the somewhat more sanctified walls of the faculty conference room, short-circuits the learning process and undermines the will of the student. (29)

Ironically, rather than resulting in a new optics, such representational technology, insisting the student’s eye be trained, discriminating, before it can process information in any sensible way, is about as old-hat as you can get in our field; think of those earlier reader-based rhetoricians, Brooks and Warren, assuring the student that the topic for one’s writing was of far less concern than the ability to “think straight about it” (7). The culmination of our not-so-new optical technology is a formal essay assignment asking students to interpolate their own text between texts on which they’ve performed their reading exercises, in order to arrive at some putative critical insight. But the truth of that insight, I’d suggest, seems small, tired, beside-the-point. Really, what interesting, new revelations can we expect from the following prompt?

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**Composition’s Eye/Orpheus’s Gaze/Cobain’s Journals** 13
Read Joyce Carol Oates’s essay ‘They All Just Went Away’ (p. 100) in the context of Kathleen Coulborn Faller’s ‘Children With a Secret’ (p. 146). In what ways does Faller’s analysis of children’s secrets help you better understand the essay? Does it help shed any light on Ruth Weidel’s personality and behavior? In an essay, discuss what Faller’s analysis on child abuse brings to your understanding of Oates’s concluding conversation with Ruth Weidel. (Atwan 168)

I could get students to know how to write that thing, but I could never get them to feel why in the hell anybody would want to. . . . But let’s pause on that line from Corder a moment: Why in the hell would anybody want to? Someone, somebody in hell, wanting. Desire in the underworld. I’m thinking Orpheus here.

“The act of writing begins with Orpheus’ gaze,” writes Maurice Blanchot (104). Ah yes, the passionate singer’s prohibited gaze, forbidden to turn from the clear light of day to look tenderly back on poor Eurydice half-hidden there in the night, but unable to resist that strong attraction.

Courtney, when I say I love you I am not ashamed, nor will anyone ever come close to intimidating, persuading, etc me into thinking otherwise. I wear you on my sleeve. I spread you out wide open with the wing span of a peacock, yet all too often with the attention span of a bullet to the head. (237)

Orpheus—like Jim Corder, like Kurt Cobain—dares to look back, and “under his gaze, the essence of the night reveals itself to be inessential. . . . It is inevitable that Orpheus defy the law forbidding him to ‘turn around,’ because he has already violated it the moment he takes his first step towards the shadows” (Blanchot 100). Blanchot, then, (and Corder and Cobain) brings us to Composition’s other scene, its underground, the place where the inessential is so tellingly exposed. Writing in that space involves different issues: How does one standing in the shadows give voice to his longing? What does one even write there, in that “extreme moment of freedom, the moment in which he frees . . . the work of his concern” (104)? What transcriptive technology can record the truth of inessentiality? If the work is freed of concern, the gaze transgressive, then we’re clearly not talking about the polished text, especially one oriented dutifully around the tiny truths available through an analysis of middle-brow media. No, as Orpheus, we’re more like Fourier, perhaps, looking for travail non salarié mais passionné (Benjamin Charles Baudelaire 15), work that has no immediate pay-off other than indulging desire (and all the long-haul benefits
that implies). As Cobain and so many others show us, for the writer, the best place for such work is the journal. The journal, writes Blanchot,

is not essentially a confession, a story about oneself. It is a Memorial. What does the writer have to remember? Himself, who he is when he is not writing, when he is living his daily life, when he is alive and real.

. . . [T]his is why the truth of the Journal does not lie in the interesting and literary remarks to be found in it, but in the insignificant details that tie it to everyday reality. The Journal represents the series of reference points that a writer establishes as a way of recognizing himself, . . . a path that is still viable, a sort of parapet walk that runs alongside the other path. (71)

It’s hard, as a writing teacher, getting students to catch a glimmer of (or even the need for) that place of charged solitude that marks the essential literary space of a writer, but I can often get them to see the logic of memorializing their everyday, of capturing their unprogrammed interactions with other people and their environment.

One night last month, Chris and I dropped acid and we were watching the late show (rip off of Johnny Carson) and Paul Revere and the Raiders were on there. They were so fucking stupid! Dancing around with moustaches, trying to act comical and goofy. It really pissed us off. And I asked Chris Do you have any Paul Revere and the Raiders albums? He said yeah, so I looked through his Big collection and found the Revere records and busted them. And he got mad, then he laughed and I searched thru the rest of the Row and found Eagles, Carpenters, Yes, Joni Mitchell and said with frustration, “What the FUCK do you own these for? And so throughout the rest of the night we busted about 250 shitty Chris Novoselic records. Not only did we clear more space in the living room, Chris declared that he feels cleansed and revitalized. (2-3)

I don’t think I’d have to argue very hard to claim that the Kurt Cobain who wrote the above represents Atwan’s new kind of reader, responsive to a constant stream of images, words, and ideas; and he certainly has outlined a program of critical media consumption; but I’m more interested in the Kurt Cobain who lived that moment and who saw it as a key reference point worth archiving.
Cobain’s is a curricular project that’s about as deep as you can get—one’s life, reflections on that life, using language to craft a compelling expression of it. But when seen in the context of contemporary composition, that seems like a project from another world: it involves, not a convincing analysis of how some essayist uses “silence” or how one essay helps you understand another essay, but simply, as Ken Macrorie put it, “a surprising occasional command of metaphor, forceful beginnings and endings, telling detail, word play, irony, . . . [and] a sensuous detail that would bring alive [a writer’s] ideas and feelings” (Uptaut 22). It doesn’t ask students to work on what they read but rather to “write freely, first recording random thoughts, then focusing on one subject, . . . [producing] what the poet Wallace Stevens called ‘the exquisite environment of fact’” (22).

I enjoy those earlier voices in our field—Corder’s, Moffett’s, Macrorie’s—writers not as concerned with reality as pre-mediated, pre-determined, rooted strictly in the critical engagement and appreciation of a narrow band of readings. David Harrington, for example, in his 1968 CCC article “Teaching Students the Art of Discovery,” seems to prefigure the final form of Cobain’s Journals (indeed, he even sounds like Cobain-as-zealous-naif) when he urges on writing teachers a pedagogy of quotidian reality, one asking students to work with a jumble of lived details rather than a series of thematized reading selections, to insist upon our being alive and sensitive to a multitude of highly varied and possibly downright confusing details connected with the subject under study. We should be forcing students to cope with masses of hitherto unorganized data, many neglected yet valuable areas of their own experience or education, the full resources of the language they use, their system of values. (8)

So it’s no surprise, given this desire to re-energize the student’s optical sensory, that the technology of the daybook figured prominently in the pedagogy of the time. Clark McKowen, speaking at a 1971 CCCC workshop on “Using Autobiography and Journals,” “opened his presentation by stating that he no longer gives ‘writing’ assignments in his composition class; instead, without detailed instructions, he asks students to keep a journal” (Workshop 281). Another speaker at that workshop, H. R. Wolk, concurred: “The need we all have to ‘rediscover our centers’ is satisfied in the long run by journal writing” (281). The 1970 textbook McKowen wrote with William Sparke, Montage: Investigations in Language, begins with an explanation to students of why they might want to keep a journal. Their rationale is vision-based: the journal as retroactive/projective archival technology for an engaged life, a Blanchotian
mirror of the everyday. Their pedagogical principles are such that Cobain might have studied under them:

The trouble with fresh experiences is that they tend to fade quickly. . . . Many writers regularly collect scraps of interest from their day to day experiences. They use their journals to capture ideas, bits of conversation, insights and images. . . . [N]ot only can it be a place to record finished ideas or the raw material for ideas; it can also be a place in which to explore and create . . . a record of a student’s mental conversation with himself. (5)

The popular appeal of Cobain’s journals proves the enduring logic of another earlier compositionist, Thomas C. Buell, who, in 1969, abandoned the traditional academic in favor of the more intriguing pleasures of the everyday’s texts: “All too often,” he claimed, “the ‘research’ paper becomes a substitute for the more valuable short paper, frequently assigned” (43). Some of the “directed assignments” Buell suggests for short writings in a student’s daybook—“Describe an incident of minor importance but one which you felt vitally important at the time,” “Evaluate your stand on a controversial issue,” “Discuss a situation which you find intolerable,” “Destroy an enemy” (45)—ask for just the kind of genres Cobain was fond of. And Cobain’s Journals suggest several other assignments Buell would have appreciated: Make up a fake biography of your life; Transcribe the ideal interview with you that you’d like to see published; List all your personal buzzwords; Send a letter to a long-dead rock critic (say, Lester Bangs) bemoaning the sorry state of popular music criticism; Demonstrate to others that you’re at least more intelligent and cool than they think; Draw what your band’s album cover would look like; Figure out who you would thank in your liner notes (Cobain: “Thanks to unencouraging parents everywhere for giving their children the will to show them up” [Cross 180]); and finally, Forget the literacy autobiography—instead, Write your music autobiography:

My parents owned a compact stereo component system molded in simulated wood grain casing and a 4 record box set featuring AM radio’s contemporary hits of the early seventies called ‘good vibrations’ by Ronco. It had such hits as Tony Orlando & Dawn’s “Tie a Yellow Ribbon” and Jim Croche’s “Time in a Bottle.” . . . I cried to “Seasons in the Sun.” . . . In 1976 I found out that the beatles had been broken up since 71. My parents got a divorce so I moved in with my dad into a trailer park. . . . My dads friends talked him into joining
Donald Murray was another strong advocate of the journal, calling it “a way to capture . . . guesses and fragments” (11). Like Cobain’s, Murray’s daybooks are a miscellany full of questions, snippets of writing, notes he’s made at literary and other events, outlines and ideas, diagrams of how various pieces might be organized, drafts, observations, quotations, newspaper clippings, reading notes, pasted-in pictures, copies of letters he wrote and wants to save, and lots of lists (11-12). More than scholarly appurtenance, such “guesses and fragments” make the journal a contemplative space in which to pore over and sift through those insignificant details that tie us to, and ultimately become, our everyday lives. The importance of such self-reflection cannot be overstated:

What [Cobain’s] interviewers—and the fans who read these [interviews]—never knew was that almost every word he uttered had been rehearsed: in his head with the band driving around in the van or, in many instances, actually written out in his journals. . . . He had imagined these moments since he began retreating from the outside world after his parents’ divorce, spending all that time in his room writing in Pee Chee notebooks. (Cross 114)

It’s a toss-up, I guess, whether Cobain’s journals were more valuable in allowing him a quiet place to prepare for his real life or in offering him a dream-space in which he could live his desired life. Perhaps the ultimate value of a daybook is that it enables a fusion of both worlds, a way of ordering one’s daily life that captures a different sort of vision, self-reflection as self-definition—an inner accounting that amounts to an evolving credo:

- I am threatened by ridicule
- I am overly concience of the sincerity in my voice.
- I like to have sex with people
- I love my parents yet I disagree with merely every thing they stand for.
- I understand and appreciate the value of religion for others.
- My emotions are affected by music.
- punk rock means freedom
- I use bits and pieces of others personalities to form my own. (95)
In terms of e-literacy, Cobain’s *Journals* challenge: could even the most well-equipped computer allow the very hand-crafted visuality of his notebooks, which, besides a writing space, provided him with a place for doing minutely-detailed comic strips, thinking on paper about new lettering designs for his band’s name, roughing out album covers and T-shirt designs, storyboarding videos, drawing guitars, copying the Iron Maiden logo-ghoul, or just sketching? Are such uses important? If so, the everydayness of the daybook necessitates a portability beyond even the laptop, perhaps. Murray, for example, is explicit about the kind of journal he uses:

[A] ten-by-eight spiral notebook filled with greenish paper, narrow-ruled, with a margin down the left. . . . I write in my lap, in the university, in bed, or sitting down on a rock during a walk. A hardbound book doesn’t work for me. I find a spiral book more convenient, and since I write in all sorts of light, indoors and out, I find the greenish paper comfortable. I chose the size because it fits in the outside pocket of the canvas bag I have with me all the time. (11)

Cobain’s overwhelming preference, a drug-store’s cheap 8½ x 11 spiral-bound notebook, suggests a similar desire for a convenient, comfortable tactility.

Does Official Composition want journals? Of course not. The abuse heaped on Cobain’s *Journals* by the mainstream media is at once staggering and unsurprising. In a brief, dismissive piece in the *New York Times*, King Kaufman tosses aside this poignant archive of the everyday as nothing more than “the musings of anyone in his 20’s: letters to friends, naïve whining about politics, lists of favorite records . . . , equivocating about the severity of his drug problem, even the occasional recipe” (21). Pete Townshend, writing in the *Observer*, calls them “the scribbings of some once beautiful, muddled, angry, petulant, spoiled, drug-addled middle-class white boy from a divorced family”; they’re not even real journals for Townshend, they’re “so-called.” The disparaging terms reviewers use—“semi-incoherent,” “puerile,” “obviously sick,” “mentally deranged,” “ridiculous,” “pathetic,” “torturous”—issue from the sober light of day, where no sense can be made of nocturnal fascinations. They “provide no insight,” Kaufman harrumphs; “I picked up this book searching for connections,” moans Townshend, who comes off as a bad parody of a comp teacher when he uses the *Journals* as evidence that Cobain must have plagiarized in his recorded output: based on these “infantile scribblings,” he sniffs, “Cobain had a lot of help [on his albums].”

*Hope I die before I turn into Pete Townshend.*

(255)
In a review in The Nation, Alex Abramovich fussily “raises the question of why, and whether, to read the Journals at all,” painting Cobain the journal writer as an Orpheus who never leaves the underworld: “Even at their darkest, Nirvana’s songs were filled with light. But Cobain’s Journals, which consist essentially of the same rhetoric we find in his songs, pull off the difficult trick of making his words sound mundane again—they never break through the darkness” (31). Like the Maenads, tormented by Orpheus’s beautiful song, the mainstream critics of Cobain’s Journals rip him apart out of their frustration with his unconcern for them, his “impulse toward the empty depths” (Blanchot 100). Blinded by the light of pop fetishism, they ignore the brave, sad humanity at work in these pages, the record of Cobain’s parapet-walk alongside his life. At the very least, they lack the sympathetic insight of a Don Murray, who preserved journal space as “a private place where you can think and where you can be dumb, stupid, sloppy, silly” (12). Cobain’s reviewers all mouth the same plaint: why didn’t he care to make this better, conventional, brilliant?

That’s the writing teacher’s blues-refrain regarding student motivation, those students who dare give their work the careless look; by looking for their own preferred taste in perfection, teachers and critics miss how truly inspired the work might be. And by “journal,” I hope by now it’s clear I mean any kind of contemplative writing that represents a poetic attempt at self-expression. Such writing might be typically found in a writer’s journal, but it can appear elsewhere as well. Take Joseph Tsujimoto’s 1988 NCTE monograph Teaching Poetry Writing to Adolescents: his reasons for having middle-school students practice the art of poetry speak to these same basic spiritual, intellectual, and social uses of (and needs for) self-expression:

I teach poetry because it gives students a way of crystallizing and publicly expressing private emotions that otherwise might be impossible to communicate. . . . [P]oetry extends our experience and broadens our consciousness, making us aware of other people’s points of view, other people’s visions of history, the cosmos, and God. In this one sense alone lies its most practical function: to humanize and elevate our race as a civilized species, cultivating sensitive, open-minded human beings—which is the true vocation for which we are preparing our students. (xiv)

Or this: a young man, Troy Cox, in one of my writing classes, is asked to write up a plan for his research paper on hip hop and begins, not by reviewing literature or stating a thesis, but rather by taking a page out of Cobain, forcing as innocuously straightforward an assignment as that into serving as a repository for his everyday. So Troy begins amassing the insignificance of his everyday,
showing that the need for genres to capture student self-expression are bubbling that close under the surface of our courses:

I am busy watching the destruction of expressions greatest form: hip-hop. Mainstream hip-hop is nearing its end, as its path winds deep into American greed. It is important to justify hip-hops’ death because it is all part of a procedure. In this procedure, I the brother of hip-hop have just past the stage of denial, I will no longer convince myself that I love this hoes and bling non-sense. First off you might be asking why I call myself the brother of hip-hop. Well how couldn’t hip-hop be my brother? Hip-hop was there for my first traveling basketball game, and echoed loud through out the house with me, it was there the first time I came home drunk, even took family vacations with me, well if hip-hop isn’t my brother I’d sure like to know who I spent all those years growing old with.

Troy turns my stock assignment into that much-preferred “music autobiography” genre. Writing eloquently of the connection between inspiration and desire (“It introduces into the concern for the work the gesture of unconcern in which the work is sacrificed: the last law of the work has been transgressed” [103]), Blanchot provides the best jacket-blurb for Cobain’s notebooks (as well as feedback on Troy’s paper):

the work . . . is neither finished nor unfinished: it is. What it says is exclusively that: that it is—and nothing more. . . . [It] belongs to the solitude of something that expresses only the word being. (64)

In our own field, post-60s, journaling has become outré, suspect, guilty by association with expressivism. In 1980, D’Angelo soberly warned instructors using his textbook that “students who attend exclusively to personal writing . . . or journal writing will not necessarily become better writers of expository or persuasive prose” (Teacher’s Manual 5). D’Angelo, then, was prescient in his movement away from the possibly sloppy and silly to efficient portentousness, for students these days aren’t destroying enemies or describing incidents of minor importance, they’re being asked to “give a ‘Geertzian’ reading to scenes from their own immediate culture (the behavior of teenagers at a shopping mall, characteristic styles in decorating a dorm room) and they are asked to imagine that they are working alongside Geertz and making his project their own” (Bartholomae and Petrosky vii). Troy’s little nothing of a paper might not be popular with certain writing teachers who would wonder why he’s chronicling his life’s passions instead of perfecting university forms. Plus, it’s full of error-static. Only the rest of Troy’s life will show how important
it was for him to work on the voice and content of his own personal gospel in this paper, rather than practice an academic ventriloquist act.

Yeah punctuation, I was stoned alot when I was learning that stuff. (3)

Composition’s eye seeks the explicitness of clarity, the already-focused, not the rough poetry of the raw archive. It wants analysis, not data; the considered, not the seen; sense, not sensation. There can be no experience outside of comprehension. What I’m asking for is life, as lightly-mediated as possible, a return to the primary sensation of vision. Art critic Philip Gefter praises a show of photographs by Stephen Shore. The photos, which Gefter compares to the work of Walker Evans and Robert Frank, are a visual diary of images recorded during Shore’s road trips back and forth across the United States in the 1970s. So, cheap roadside motel interiors, the booth at a truck stop, the marquee of a desert drive-in—all combine to memorialize a life lived, scenes encountered. For Gefter, “The[se] pictures taken at motels, in diners and at shopping centers attest to the traveler on a course of discovery—not of spectacles or charged events but, rather, what turn out to be revelations about the ordinary” (28). (“Revelations about the ordinary,” that’s a phrase Macrorie might have used to define his own curricular theory.) And Stephen Shore didn’t stop with just photographs; he added a kind of daybook layer to his traveler’s auto-ethnography, making “daily lists of what he ate, how long he drove, what he saw on television or at the movies, how many photographs he took and the number of photographic postcards from an earlier project that he surreptitiously distributed in drug stores and truck stops” (28). Gefter explains that such diaries, “both written and photographic, held for [Shore] a fascination with the way ‘certain kinds of facts and materials from the external world can describe a day or an activity’” (28). But in the face of our imperative that students wax perceptive on some “interesting and challenging text, . . . the sort of readings we talk about when we talk with our colleagues” (Bartholomae and Petrosky v, vi), such a kooky little diary-project, the goal of which is merely to describe a day, can seem pretty irrelevant. Orpheus’s gaze, though, transgresses pertinence: it is impertinent. “His inspired and forbidden gaze dooms Orpheus to lose everything,” Blanchot writes.

[The] forbidden act is precisely the one Orpheus must perform in order to take the work beyond what guarantees it, and which he can perform only by forgetting the work, carried away by a desire coming out of the night and bound to the night as its origin, . . . when something more important than the work, more stripped of importance than the
work, is proclaimed and asserted. The work is everything to Orpheus, everything except that desired gaze in which the work is lost. (102)

In Composition, there is NEVER anything more important than the work. Instead of trivializing the journal’s potential as eccentric compendium into just a space to answer reading questions, limiting its richly auto-archival possibilities to the production of media-centric essays, why not forget the work? What Composition needs most, perhaps, is a bad attitude. Cobain wrote like a pissed-off Orpheus, feeling (and this is an oft-recurring line in the Journals) “as if God had fucked me” (Cross 278). Compositionists need to feel fucked, too; they need to sit around their living rooms, rip up about 250 shitty “classic” essays in our complimentary copies of reader-based textbooks, and move on, cleansed and revitalized. Instead of students writing about the sort of essays we talk about when we talk with our colleagues, how about letting them write on how they don’t want to read them? Did Sparke and McKowen call the journal a record of mental conversations with oneself? No doubt:

I wish there was someone I could ask for advice. Someone who wouldn’t make me feel like a creep for spilling my guts and trying to explain all the insecurities that have plagued me for, oh, about 25 years now. I wish someone could explain to me why, exactly, I have no more desire to learn anymore. (qtd. in Cross 254)

The tragic irony in all these reading-based courses is that, because of their weirdly determined occularity, proscribing the dark night of expressive solitude in favor of the broad daylight of expository or persuasive prose, it makes our classroom less an éspace littéraire than a debriefing room. Composition’s eye needs to remember the composition’s I. The essential solitude needed by a writer was compromised as soon as we began to trope audience, that hypothetical space so unreal it has to be fictified. D’Angelo, for example, immediately shifts the writer’s eye to the collective imaginary, asking a student to “determine the characteristics of your audience in a systematic way by asking certain basic questions,” including age, education, social and cultural interests, political and philosophical beliefs, taste in movies, even whether they jog (Process and Thought 22). Linda Flower’s locus classicus for writing, making utterly apparent her rejection of the solitary space needed for composing, is the job application letter (147). Flower’s reader-based prose, then, equals writing purged of all terror and dread, suffused with a kind of business-like commonsense; you can just about see Flower’s writers, rolling up their sleeves to psych out the rhetorical problem, which is simply “how to say what you
mean and how to deal with your reader” (1), learning “basic patterns readers expect” (192). We turned students away from their own vision, convincing them writer-based prose was in some way a failing; we replaced their sight with the eyes of others. This is composition in the authoritative light of clear, logical structure. Fine, as far as it goes; I just wish writing teachers had bothered to include some acknowledgement of composition in that other light, the hazy late-afternoon’s shifting light, those moments when color and tone are valued over line and shape, composition as it appeals to the sensational eye (Schjeldahl). Half-baked writing, say, on how hip-hop seems almost like a brother to you. Blanchot defines composition a bit differently than Flower: “To write is to arrange language under fascination” (77). Writing teachers should not be so quick to give up failure, especially when it results from the honest attempt to describe the indescribable.

To give up failure is a crime Blanchot calls “much more serious than giving up success, as though what we call the insignificant, the inessential, the mistaken, could[n’t] reveal itself—to someone who accepted the risk and freely gave himself up to it—as the source of all authenticity” (102). Does Orpheus’s gaze kill Eurydice? But she’s dead already. As Orpheus’s work, then, re-realizing her would be reanimating a corpse (something Corder saw). Better he should be true to his desire, the only real thing left. I like playing my cards wrong. (98)

I love reading, of course. And I care that students read interesting stuff and ask interesting questions about it, but I’m equally concerned with what they collect, what they cherish, what (even whether) they obsess about. When exactly does the work of writing become a true project, a work? For Blanchot, it’s when “the word being is pronounced in it, in the violence of a beginning which is its own; this event occurs when the work is the innermost part of someone writing it and of someone reading it” (65). I don’t see that necessary passion swelling, building to a crushing wave, in work that has as its origin a prompt like “Is the ad effective? Can you think of methods that would be more effective?” (Atwan 311). Corder brought back a sobering realization from his night of soul-searching: “What I am trying to get at here is that the occasion is wrong. The occasion contains no immediacy; it offers no genuine need that must be genuinely answered” (165). I’m questioning, then, the limits of assignments that simply settle for a student’s understanding. I want writing that offers revelations about the ordinary. I want lists: lists of what you did one afternoon; lists of what you saw in the street; lists of people from high school; lists of favorite bands, albums, songs; lists of things you bought; lists of traits that define you; lists of what you ate; lists of what you saw on television or
at the movies; lists of reasons why the drummer in your band should be fired. The everyday runs on lists. At some point in a young man’s life, and I could muse on this fact for days, he felt the Top 50 albums included *Raw Power; Surfer Rosa; Leadbelly’s Last Sessions, Vol. 1; Combat Rock; It Takes a Nation of Millions; The Man Who Sold the World; Flowers of Romance;* and *Get the Knack.* And so, my contribution to Thomas C. Buell’s (I hope) ongoing list of suggestions for the “short paper, frequently assigned”: *Compile a mix-tape of your favorite songs.* Here’s a few snippets from my student Charlotte Peterson’s weblog journal in response to that prompt:

If I was to make you a mix-tape I would definitely have to put some really old-school stuff on it. Old-school to me entails Beastie Boys, Run DMC, Tiffany and old Madonna. That’s just too weird to be combined together. If they were toys on a shelf, at the end of the night their egos would beat each other up.

2. We don’t need no education by Pink Floyd. This song reminds me of St. Paul Central in every way shape and form. It’s the need of adolescence to break free of stupid rules. I know it meant more in England where school is more like prison. But have you seen the slit windows of that high school? The chanting and ethereal theme music. The whole song just speeds up my adrenaline and the need to fight.

8. Fell in love with a girl by the White Stripes. Remember in the old Batman episodes they had the go-go cage girls? That’s this song.

I want to know, in other words, the *trouvailles* that students would put in their own personal Cornell Boxes. Our new masterpieces, then, include auto-ethnographies of the exquisite environment of the facts of one’s everyday world, slips of paper scrawled with the poetically enumerated banalities one makes into a life, the “metaphysics of ephemera,” to use the term Joseph Cornell borrowed from Nerval (Caws 136). From Cornell’s own journal:

Feeling of *felicity* about early morning. . . . Blustery but pleasant—an exceptionally fine atmosphere (magical, theatrical). Shaved and bathed around one—had lunch of donuts, caramel pudding, two cups Dutch process cocoa all milk, wholewheat bread, peanut butter, peach jam (wolfed milky way bar after breakfast). Bought Robert éclair (chocolate) for lunch and baker’s assortment Mrs. Wagner’s Peach Pie 6 cents, 1/2 dozen icing cakes Bay West. To Matta Exhibition. . . . Walked North River 5:30 watched sun on water—got buns—brought home. . . . Beautiful smile from Robert leaving house to go in. Stayed with me all afternoon. (Caws 129)
Cornell’s diaries are also, not surprisingly, a chronicle of his evolving music autobiography—recordings and radio broadcasts being some of the ephemera that made life most wonderful for him:

awakening by stove—tuning in about 3—the Pastoral Symphony of Beethoven making of the room an enchanted place—cup of chocolate & bed—especially gracious overtone (Caws 188)

playing PELLEAS breakthru of orange-rose light with a supernatural eeriness or drama worthy of the Debussy world superb (Caws 255)

sky is a Mozart #40 blue—paler than “singing” blue”—or some might say one after the “Jupiter” (Caws 448)

Howard Hussey about Gieseking—Debussy—“Preludes” “healing”—for myself something different—consolation—healing more about Debussy his credo
healing once found pre-eminently in the slow movement Opus 163 Schubert’s String Quintet
where does one go for “healing” when the player &/or radio breaks down? (Caws 415)

How precious to have such journals—Cornell’s and Cobain’s (and so many others)—the endlessly fascinating road-notes scrawled by these travelers on their course of discovery. It’s not just a recording of reality the daybook affords, but a fusion of the outer and the inner, the real and the desired, an attempt to capture the transmutation of outer life by inner reality (or vice versa). Cobain was incensed when some of his notebooks were stolen because he knew their irreplaceably intimate connection with being:

Within the months between October 1991 thru December 92 I have had 4 four notebooks filled with two years worth of poetry and personal writings and lyrics stolen from me at separate times... I’ve never been a very prolific person so when creativity flows, it flows. I find myself scribbling on little note pads and pieces of loose paper which results in a very small portion of my writings to ever show up in true form. It’s my fault but the most violating thing I’ve felt this year is not the media exxagerations or the catty gossip, but the rape of my personal thoughts. ripped out
Cobain writes in his journals in the same space Cornell does, that special nexus of internal and external time that Cornell termed the *eterniday*, “a timeless-ness within passing time, gathered like the work itself, in the presence of the everyday” (Caws 31). What Cornell most loved, according to Mary Ann Caws, the editor of his journals,

was looking... He noted all this visual experience, vicarious action, and hard observation down on scraps of napkins which he subsequently folded into a book or in his bulging files, or placed with the jottings he kept as a diary. Cornell was one of those burning-eyed types whose desire for some striking beauty or passing event is enhanced by its notation. (32)

We train our students’ eyes on texts, then, especially GREAT texts, at our peril. Masterpieces have a way of becoming tiresome, of not being able to hold their charged luster very long. “As we look at the most certain masterpiece,” Blanchot knew, “whose beginning dazzles us with its brilliance and decisiveness, we find that we are also faced with something that is fading away, a work that has suddenly become invisible again, is no longer there, and has never been there” (103). Cobain’s repetitive attempts in his Journals to enumerate his favorite albums show that a Top 50 list is always in flux, always full of quirky choices one adores and then abandons. Yet the ToC’s of our field’s reader-based textbooks seem to change only minimally, glacially, even across authors and publishers. What changes us far more than masterpieces, Cobain knew, was the irrational spirituality of something happening in life—say, in that grocery store parking lot where you saw a local band’s free concert; then later, we sit writing in our journal about pulling into the lot, remembering how

*There stood the Air Supply box boy holding a Les Paul with a picture from a magazine of Kool cigarettes laminated on it, a redhead biker boy and that tall lukin guy, the first to ever wear skin tight levis... I came to the promise land of a grocery store I found my special purpose.* (57)

This is straight Macrorie, who urged writing teachers in 1968 to have students “record short fabulous realities in a notebook or journal,” suggesting an entry
such as, “Sign downtown: ‘Four Barbers, No Waiting,’” and then below: “‘Television While You Wait’” (“To Be Read” 688). Cobain intuitively understood Macrorie’s assignment, writing, for example, his own short fabulous reality of the time a Tacoma music store salesman hassled him because he wanted to test out a used guitar at full volume:

He went away so I cranked it again, so he walks back in with his diaphanah smile and turns it down. What a dick I should have thrown it threw the goddamn sliding glass door. I said Sheeettt! I left. That old Fuckin Fender would a blew anyway.

(72)

To become a writer, Cobain seems to be telling us, start with some stimulating experiences, a bunch of notebooks, and a kind of impertinence.

Composition, I hereby announce, begins with the gaze of Kurt Cobain (his most striking feature, it was said, “was his remarkable azure eyes; even nurses in the hospital commented on their beauty” [Cross 7]). Composition’s eye, then, becomes the sad, doomed singer’s prohibited gaze—unconcerned, impatient, infantile, pathetic, semi-incoherent, torturous. “All we can sense of inspiration is its failure, all we can recognize of it is its misguided violence” (Blanchot 102). Cobain, then, as Composition’s Orpheus? The Journals, work that was never meant to see the light of day, as his (our) Eurydice, and not those formal masterpieces the critics adore? Orpheus may, Blanchot notes, betray “the work and Eurydice and the night. But if he did not turn around to look at Eurydice, he still would be betraying, being disloyal to, the boundless and imprudent force of his impulse . . . to look into the night at what the night is concealing” (100). So yes, the journal as precisely where Cobain-as-Orpheus could dare desire “beyond the measured limits of the song” (Blanchot 101). Journal-writing, with its guesses and fragments, was Cobain’s attempt at making concealment visible. Of course Eurydice can’t be saved. Jim Corder, his vision, too, veiled by night, braved a look back on his beloved writing class, and when he did, it died. And so arose the need to write.

But faced with trying to write a paper using the prewriting/drafting/revision process he’d taught his students, Corder learned “the sorry truth” (165) of that system’s corny uselessness. “What I actually did,” Corder writes, “was to cash in ideas I already had for writing, threshing around among scraps of paper, notebooks, and lists of things to do that were piled on my desk” (165). Ultimately, we are all Jim Corder, alone in the dark, with only paper scraps to guide us. Pressure building, as around Cobain, who carted those ratty spiral notebooks from house to house on his too-brief world-tour, giving him a contemplative space where he could, among other things, endlessly fidget with the
placement of hits on his Top 50 list. Down underground, like Cornell in his basement, surrounded by all those boxes of thrift-store treasures, passionately transcribing journal entries originally jotted down on napkins years ago. For where else but in something like a journal can students see the value of their everyday and learn how its passage is enhanced by its notation? Where else, as writers, do we explore the obsessions that tie us to our privileged themes? Where else do we enter so completely into the history of our diaspora (Nancy 54)? And where else can the young Orpheus rehearse and craft his heart-rending lyrics, making them so poignant that even the Furies shed tears? “In order to write,” Blanchot points out, “one must already be writing” (104). And just where else can one start writing before writing?

This is not to be taken seriously. This is not to be read as opinions. It is to be read as poetry. Its obvious that I am on the educated level of about 10th grade in high school. Its obvious that these words were not thought out or even re-read. This writing style is what I like to call thru the perspective of a 10th grader, her/his attempt at showing that no matter what level of intelligence one is on, we all question love and lack of love and fear of love... True english is so fucking boring. And this little pit-stop we call life, that we so seriously worry about is nothing but a small, over the week end jail sentence, compared to what will come with death. Life isn't nearly as sacred as the appreciation of passion. (175)

Twin Cities, MN

Works Cited


