

IN PRAISE OF THE ESSAY

Philosophy begins in response to the Delphic injunction, "Know Thyself." The essay begins more modestly, with Montaigne's question, "What do I know?" The tentative, questioning nature of the essay permits it to explore the doubts, terrors, and hopes that arise during periods of great change. According to O. B. Hardison, this explains why the essay—along with the office memo—is the most widely read form of writing today.

by O. B. Hardison, Jr.

The ancient god Proteus knew the secrets of the past and the future. Those who would learn them were required to bind him with chains before asking their questions. When bound, Proteus would change into all manner of shapes to escape. Menelaus visited Proteus when becalmed at Pharos and forced him to reveal the fates of Agamemnon and Odysseus. Aristaeus, a shepherd of Tempe, was told by his mother Cyrene to visit Proteus when Aristaeus's bees were dying. As Vergil announces in the *Georgics*, she advised: "The more he turns himself into different shapes, the more you, my son, must hold on to those strong chains."

Writing an essay on the essay is appropriate in an age that delights in strange loops and Gödelian recursions and that has announced, more often perhaps than it really needs to, that every art form is first and foremost a comment on itself. More than any other literary form, the essay, like Proteus, resists all efforts to contain it.

Let me put one card on the table immediately. There is a rumor going about that the essay is an endangered species. There have even been calls to "save the essay," as if it were a sensitive species on the point of extinction. Nothing could be more absurd. The essay is tough, infinitely adaptable, and ubiquitous. It has more in common with the German cockroach than with the Tennessee snail darter. The analogy has hidden relevance. The cockroach is a primitive creature. It appears very early on the evolutionary chain. The essay is also primitive. Roland Barthes suggests that, in the evolution of projections of the imagination, it may precede the formation of all concepts of genre.

I recall that the newspapers of my childhood, in addition to printing letters to the editor, regularly paid homage to "literature" by including poems. The poems were often maudlin and sometimes egregious, but they were recognizably poems.

Today, how many poems do you find in the newspaper? Unless you read a paper

that comes out once a week in a remote rural county and has a name something like the *Culpeper Eagle*, you do not find a single one. Instead, in any up-to-date newspaper, you find essays. They are called op-ed pieces, and their authors are nationally syndicated. These authors do not need support from foundations. Some earn more in an hour than many Americans do in six months. People read these essays. Today, the essay is one of only two literary genres of which this can be said, the other being the memo.

I return, now, to the myth I have invoked. The chief characteristic of Proteus is elusiveness. If there is no genre more widespread in modern letters than the essay, there is also no genre that takes so many shapes and that refuses so successfully to resolve itself, finally, into its own shape.

Francis Bacon concludes in *The Wisdom of the Ancients* that Proteus symbolizes matter. He adds, "If any skillful servant of Nature shall bring force to bear on matter, and shall vex it and drive it to extremities as if with the purpose of reducing it to nothing," it will assume all shapes but return "at last to itself."

I take heart from Bacon's *Wisdom*. In spite of the danger that the essay may fight back, I propose in the following pages to vex it and drive it to extremities in the hope that by the end it will return to itself and reveal something of its true nature.

The word "essay" comes from the Old French *essai*, defined by Partridge as "a trial, an attempt." From this meaning comes the English "to essay" in the sense of "to make a trial or an attempt," as in Emerson's statement, "I also will essay to be."

The word also comes into English via the Norman French *assaier*, "to assay," meaning to try or test, as in testing the quality of a mineral ore.

German has two words for essay, *Abhandlung*, a "dealing with" something, and *Aufsatz*, a "setting forth." Herder's "Essay on the Origin of Speech" is an *Abhandlung*; Martin Heidegger's essay on thingliness—"The Thing"—is an *Aufsatz*. *Abhandlungen* tend to be ponderous and, you might say, Germanic. *Aufsätze* have an

altogether lighter touch—a touch, one imagines, like that of Goethe tapping out the rhythms of the hexameter on the back of his Roman mistress.

As far as I have been able to learn, the first use of "essay" to mean a literary composition occurred in the title of the most famous collection of such compositions ever published, Montaigne's *Essais*. If you look for the first English use of the term in this sense in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, you may be surprised at what you find. Instead of a majestic series of entries marching forward from the Middle Ages, you encounter the following

statement: "Essay. A composition of moderate length on any particular subject, or branch of a subject; originally implying want of finish . . . but now said of a composition more or less elaborate in style though limited in range. The use in this sense is apparently taken from Montaigne, whose *Essais* were first published in 1580."

In other words, Montaigne invented the term, and the English took it directly from him. Another surprise: In English the term was first used on the title page of the *Essays* that Francis Bacon published in



1597. It made its second appearance on the title page of John Florio's translation of—you guessed it—Montaigne's *Essayes; or, Morall, Politike, and Militairie Discourses*, published in 1603. Thereafter, the term was applied more and more broadly to any composition that did not fall obviously into some other, better-defined category. It plays the same role in literary criticism that the term "miscellaneous" does in budgeting.

Three historical facts supplement these lexicographical observations. First, the essay did not appear out of nowhere. Montaigne's principal guide in the art of the essay was the Greek writer Plutarch, whose *Opera Moralia* consist of short compositions on topics of general interest, such as the cessation of oracles, whether fish or land animals are more crafty, whether water or fire is more useful, the reasons for not running into debt, and the man in the moon. According to Montaigne, "of all the authors I know, [Plutarch] most successfully commingled art with nature and insight with knowledge." Another writer much admired by Montaigne and more so by Bacon is Seneca, whose unflinching uplifting letters often come close to being essays.

Second, in spite of this and other precedents, the essay is something new. In the 16th century, the standard prose form was the oration. Orations are utilitarian; they seek to accomplish something. As the rhetoric books say, their object is to persuade. Montaigne calls this characteristic the *Hoc age*—the "Do this!"—impulse. To persuade efficiently, orators developed a standard kind of organization called *dispositio*. *Dispositio* is the literary equivalent of the foregone conclusion.

Montaigne carefully disavows all such advance planning. In the essay "On Education," he quotes with obvious relish the comment of the king of Sparta on a long speech by the ambassadors from Samos:

"As for your beginning, I no longer remember it; nor consequently, the middle; as for the conclusion, I do not desire to do anything about it." In "On the Resemblance of Children," he asserts, "I do not correct my first ideas by later ones . . . I wish to represent the progress of my moods, and that each part shall be seen at its birth." In another context he adds, "I have no other drill-master than chance to arrange my writings. As my thoughts present themselves to my mind, I bring them together." So much for *dispositio*.

As Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* shows, orations can be impressive and informative. They can even, on occasion, be persuasive. There is little room in them, however, for spontaneity. They move ahead with the elephantine thump of the *Abhandlung* rather than the butterfly tango of the *Aufsatz*. The point of orations is not to reveal private feelings but to make things happen.

In fact, the essay is the opposite of an oration. It is a literary trial balloon, an informal stringing together of ideas to see what happens. Let's be frank. From the standpoint of the oration, the essay is feckless. It does not seek to do anything, and it has no standard method even for doing nothing. Montaigne calls essay writing "that stupid enterprise" ("*cette sottie entreprise*"), and when Roland Barthes delivered an oration indicating his acceptance of a chair at the College de France, he apologized for his literary philandering. "I must admit," he said, "that I have produced only essays."

Third fact. Even in its infancy, the essay shows its Protean heritage. Montaigne's essays are associative, discursive, informal, meandering, and slovenly. Being the first of their kind, they ought at least to have become models for what followed, in the same way that even disreputable people—muggers, prostitutes, con men, and so forth—will become models if they are

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really good at what they do. They did not. Bacon's essays were inspired by Montaigne's but are, if anything, anti-Montaignian. Especially in their 1597 form, they are aphoristic, staccato, assertive, hortatory, abrasive.

This brings us to style.

Morris Croll wrote the classic study of 16th-century prose style. He calls Montaigne's style "libertine" and Bacon's "Tacitean." Libertine sentences slither along from phrase to phrase with no proper ending. They are just what you would expect from writing that uses quotations promiscuously and refuses to organize itself. "Tacitean" comes from the name of the Roman historian Tacitus. Tacitus was curt to the point of obscurity, and his name has the same root as English "taciturn." That too is appropriate. In their first edition, Bacon's *Essays* are curt and businesslike. Not a word wasted. Time is money.

In fact both Montaigne and Bacon were reacting not only against the oration but also against the rhetorical exhibition of the periodic sentence. In the earlier Renaissance, Cicero was the preeminent model for such writing. His sentences make language into a kind of sound sculpture, whose closest English equivalent is found in the elegantly figured prose of John Milton's *Areopagitica*.

Montaigne and Bacon, however, were anti-Ciceronian. In "Of the Education of Children," Montaigne recalls, "At the height of Cicero's eloquence many were moved to admiration; but Cato merely laughed at it . . . I would have the subject predominate, and so fill the imagination of him who listens that he shall have no remembrance of the words." And again, in "Of Books": "To confess the truth boldly . . . [Cicero's] manner of writing seems to me irksome . . . If I spend an hour reading him . . . , I find oftenest only wind."

Bacon put the same idea in terms of *res* and *verba*, in terms, that is, of meaning and hot air. In the *Advancement of Learning* he observes that the Ciceronian humanists searched "more after wordes than matter, and more after the choisenesse of the Phrase, and the round and cleane composition of the sentence, and the sweet falling of the clauses . . . than after the weight of

matter, worth of subject, soundnesse of argument, life of invention, or depth of judgement."

His style enacts this rejection of humanism. Its harshness is a way of announcing his contempt for Ciceronian flatulence—his commitment to weight of matter rather than to choiceness of phrase.

Does this mean that the early essay abandons rhetoric? Absolutely not. It means, first, that the early essay substitutes one kind of rhetoric for another. Since the new kind of rhetoric is unconventional and thus unfamiliar, it means, second, that the early essay seeks to give the impression of novelty. And since the impression of novelty depends on the use of formulas that are unfamiliar and therefore not obvious to the reader, it means, third, that the early essay seems to create the illusion of being unstudied and spontaneous. It pretends to spring either from the freely associating imagination of the author or from the rigid grammar of the world of things.

There is a formula for such a style: "*ars celare artem*," art that conceals art. Montaigne announces: "The way of speaking that I like is a simple and natural speech, the same on paper as on the lips . . . far removed from affectation, free, loose, and bold." The statement is charming, but it is demonstrably false. Both Montaigne and Bacon revised their essays over and over again. The lack of artifice is an illusion created by years of effort.

I think we have some chains around Proteus. Now let us begin to vex him.

The first edition of Montaigne's *Essays* appeared in 1580. It lacked the present Book III. Another, moderately augmented edition appeared in 1582. A third version, with a new book (incorrectly labeled "Book V") and with major revisions and additions, appeared in 1588. Finally, Montaigne's famous "fille d'alliance," Marie de Gournay, issued a posthumous edition in 1595, which with further major changes was the basis of standard editions of the *Essays* until the 20th century.

The record shows that Montaigne was a familiar type, the literary neurotic who can never let his works alone, even after they are published. In general, as he revised, the self-revelation of the essays became more

overt. That is, the more clothes he put on, the more he dressed up, the more he exposed himself as a man of conflicts.

Bacon's first 10 essays may be said to initiate literary minimalism. They seem to consist chiefly of sayings from his commonplace book. The Renaissance would have called the sayings "flowers" or "sentences." Bacon's strategy may owe something to the hugely successful collection of aphorisms made by Erasmus—the *Adagia*—but Erasmus could never resist the temptation to gild every aphorism with a commentary. In the first edition of the *Essays*, Bacon offers his flowers plain.

Like Montaigne, Bacon revised compulsively. By 1625, the 10 original essays had grown to 58 plus an incomplete 59th. The essays also grew obese over the years. "Of Studies," for example, roughly doubled in size between 1597 and 1625.

Montaigne's revisions made his essays richer. Bacon's revisions seem to me to have been less happy. As his essays enlarge, they lose the taciturnity—the aggressive minimalism—that is the principal source of their power. The sentences become more sequential, more official, more pontifical, more—shall I say it?—like sentences in an oration.

In addition to making the essays more official, Bacon tried to give them philosophical status by suggesting that they were part of the grand philosophical scheme outlined in the *Novum Organum*. By calling his essays "civil and moral," Bacon was proposing them as contributions to the social sciences—specifically, to politics and ethics. In my own opinion, which conflicts with conventional wisdom in this case, the connection of the essays to the program of the *Novum Organum* was an afterthought intended to enhance their dignity.

Whatever the case, philosophy is directly relevant to the early history of the essay. In *Representative Men* Emerson properly calls Montaigne "the skeptic." The first essay that Montaigne wrote is also the longest, most ponderous essay of the lot—Montaigne's *Apology for Raimond Sebond*, which is essay 12 in Book II. Sebond was a late medieval theologian who wrote a *Theologia Naturalis* showing how design in Nature will convince even the most de-

praved agnostic of the truth of the Christian religion. At his father's request, Montaigne translated it from Latin into French.

Sebond's work is the culmination of a long tradition of pious fatuity about the Book of Nature, and once his father was safely in the ground, Montaigne deconstructed it. The deconstruction was so devastating that by the end, very little basis remained for believing in God, or design in Nature, or in anything else. Shakespeare's Hamlet seems to have read the *Apology*, since he quotes from it when he observes that the earth is a pestilent congregation of vapors and man a quintessence of dust.

When you think about them, Hamlet's quotations are appropriate. Long before Hamlet began questioning the state of Denmark, Montaigne's world had been made problematic by the religious controversies of the Reformation and the collapse of traditional verities. This is what the *Apology for Raimond Sebond* is all about. The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, which occurred just eight years before the first edition of the *Essays*, magnified the shock. If Christians who proclaim themselves models of piety can establish their position only by slaughtering those Christians who disagree with them, what evidence is there that reason has any place at all in religion? In short, a world that seemed solid, reasonable, and self-evident had shown itself to be none of the above. There were times when it seemed to Montaigne like a pestilent contagion of vapors. John Donne makes the same point in familiar lines from his first *Anniversary* on the death of Elizabeth Drury:

And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out. . . .
'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone,
All just supply, and all relation.

Historians argue about whether Montaigne was a fideist or a skeptic. The terms are so close that we need not quibble. The fideist believes that God and His ways are utterly beyond human comprehension and that therefore we must accept whatever law or custom the local tyrant tells us to believe. The skeptic systematically demonstrates that man is deceived both by sense-evidence and by reason.

If the skeptics are correct, the proper stance for the philosopher is to doubt everything. This is not nihilism but a reserving of judgment, a determination to be a detached observer rather than a partisan. The Greek term for such detachment is *ataraxia*, which means "calmness" and, by extension, a refusal to become involved. Montaigne explains in the *Apology*: "This attitude of [the skeptics] . . . accepting all objects without inclination and consent, leads them to their Ataraxy, which is a settled condition of life, exempt from the emotions that we experience . . . They are even exempted thereby from zeal about their own doctrine." At its coolest, ataraxy produces the spectator who views life ironically and refuses to become involved. However, spectators are also outsiders, and for outsiders, detachment sometimes becomes a perverse form of engagement. Hamlet's detachment is announced by his black suit and his refusal to be drawn into the *Gemütlichkeit* of the Danish court. It is closer to despair than to freedom from passion, and its result is not a series of essays enacting the process of self-realization but soliloquies in which the speaker alternates between the thoughts of murder and suicide.

This takes us to the dark outer edge of the early essay. It is a darkness that was acknowledged by Montaigne but one that lies, for the most part, beyond the emotional boundaries he set for himself.

Having been led by his own analysis to doubt the world as he had conceived of it, Montaigne turned inward in the quest for

certainty. The basic question of the *Essais* is "What do I know" — "*Que sçais-je?*" This is Montaigne's motto, and as we learn in the *Apology*, he inscribed it under a picture of a pair of scales symbolizing ataraxy—the balancing of alternatives.

Montaigne's innumerable quotations are intended as part of the answer to the question of what we know. André Gide remarks in an often-quoted essay that they are there "to show that man is always and everywhere the same." Unfortunately, the quotations do not show this. As Michael Hall observes, they are inconsistent. Evidently, when you collect several centuries' worth of wisdom on a topic, you do not get a philosophy, you get a chain of contradictory platitudes reminiscent of Polonius's advice to his son Laertes.

Turning inward was no more helpful than consulting the sages. When he turned inward, Montaigne discovered not universality but infinite variety. He was forced to conclude that the self is as various, as elusive, and as many-shaped as the world.

Without fully understanding what he was doing, Montaigne was searching for a central "I"—what Descartes would later call the *cogito*, and as a matter of fact, Montaigne powerfully influenced the Cartesian project. Descartes admitted that we may be dreaming the world, but he insisted that the *cogito* is beyond doubt—so solid, in fact, as to be the rock on which everything else can be built. But Montaigne was more radical than Descartes. He concluded from his inquiry that there is no rock. There is only an endless



series of illusions. Early in the *Essais*, he announces, "We must remove the mask from things as from persons." He adds that "being truthful is the beginning of virtue," but his great discovery is that man is as Protean as the world: "Every man has within himself the entire human condition." Later still, Montaigne uses metaphors of the arational to describe his discovery of himself: "I have seen no monster or miracle on earth more evident than myself. . . . the better I know myself, the more my misshapeness astonishes me, and the less do I comprehend myself."

In the famous introduction to "Of Repenting," the second essay in Book III, we read:

Others shape the man; I narrate him, and offer to view a special one, very ill-made, and whom, could I fashion him over, I should certainly make very different from what he is; but there is no doing that. The world is but perpetual motion; all things in it move incessantly. . . . I can not anchor my subject; he is always restless and staggering with an unsteadiness natural to him. I catch him in the state that he is in at the moment when I turn my attention to him. I do not paint his being, I paint his passing—not the passing from one age to another . . . but from day to day, from moment to moment. . . . Writers commune with the world with some special and peculiar badge; I am the first to do this with my general being, as Michel de Montaigne.

Here, I think, we have the authentic note of the *Essais* and of the essay as a genre. The essay is the enactment of a process by which the soul realizes itself even as it is passing from day to day and from moment to moment. It is the literary response to a world that has become problematic. In its complexity Montaigne's text works to disguise this fact, but it has always been an open secret.

Now let us return to Bacon. If Montaigne's essays suggest how the mind feels as it seeks by constant adjustments to find a path through a labyrinth, Bacon's method is to assert the existence of a path whether one is there or not. In the *De Argumentis Scientiarum* Bacon calls his method "initiative" in contrast to "magisterial." The magisterial method is used for teaching. It has a

well-defined shape, namely that of an oration. The initiative method is, by contrast, suggestive. As Bacon explains: "The initiative intimates. The magisterial requires that what is told should be believed; the initiative that it should be examined." Like Montaigne, Bacon was strongly attracted to skepticism. He admitted: "The doctrine of those who have denied that certainty could be attained at all has some agreement with my way of proceeding." Although he argued that empiricism offers an escape from uncertainty, he believed that most of the received knowledge of his age was false—the result of "errors and vanities," which he categorized using the metaphor of Idols: Idols of the tribe, Idols of the cave, Idols of the marketplace, Idols of the theater.

Bacon did not spend much time on religion; perhaps he found it beyond—or beneath—the reach of reason. He never attacked religion, but his heavy-handed condescension resembles thinly disguised contempt. On the other hand, the collapse during the 16th century of doctrines that had been accepted as verities for thousands of years fascinated him. The prime example was the toppling of Ptolemaic astronomy by Copernican, but astronomy was only one of many areas in which received knowledge crumbled when it was put to the test. Each failure of a traditional theory was a demonstration of the validity of the theory of Idols.

This kind of skepticism looks forward to a fully developed scientific method. It underlies Sir Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, better known as *Vulgar Errors*, which systematically exposes many superstitions of the sort deconstructed in Montaigne's *Apology*. The *Pseudodoxia* went through six editions in Browne's lifetime. In matters of religion, Browne was a fideist. Montaigne ends the *Apology* with the remark that man "will be lifted up if God by special favor lends him his hand; he will be lifted up when, abandoning and renouncing his own means, he lets himself be upheld by purely heavenly means." Browne writes in *Religio Medici*: "Me thinks there be not impossibilities enough in Religion for an active faith. . . . I love to lose myself in a mystery, to pursue my reason to an *Oh Altitudo*. . . . I learned of Ter-

tullian, *Certum est quia impossibile est.*"

Bacon's dedication of the 10 essays of 1597 claims only that they are "medicinal." The dominant meaning is simply that they are useful—they expose various errors and vanities and provide bearings for a world in flux. But the term "medicinal" is a metaphor, and its implications invite comment. According to the metaphor, the reader needs to be cured. In other words, there is some kind of metaphysical plague going around. It is a plague of doubt. Jimmy Carter felt the same thing about 20th-century America and, in one of his more disastrous orations, called it a malaise. If Bacon had been around, he would have called it a failure of nerve and would have voted for Ronald Reagan. Bacon's essays are intended to be a cure for social malaise. They are medicinal because they distill wisdom gained from life in what Bacon's heirs persist in calling "the real world."

For the same reason, the essays often have the quality of a pep talk by the coach of a losing team. The strategy is to create what might be called a "rhetoric of assurance." Accordingly, in the first edition, the sentences are chiefly commands and assertions. Omission of understood words (zeugma) gives the sentences a telegraphic quality reinforced by the paring away of modifiers, modifying phrases, and subordinate clauses. Further economy is achieved by parallelism and balance. The word order is standard. The speaker knows what he wants to say and says it directly. The main units are set off by paragraph marks—which Bacon uses as we would use "bullets" today. The modern term is appropriate. Bacon wants each sentence to have the force of a pistol shot: "• Reade not to contradict, not to believe, but to waigh and consider. • Some books are to bee tasted, others to bee swallowed, and some few to bee chewed and digested. . . . • Reading maketh a full man, conference a readye man, and writing an exacte man . . . • Histories make men wise, Poets wittie: the Mathematickes subtle, naturall Phylosophie deepe: Moral grave, Logicke and Rhetoricke able to contend."

The sentences often have an edge of cynicism, of *Realpolitik*, reminding us that Bacon had read his Machiavelli: Ambition

is a winding stair; those who marry give hostages to fortune; the stage is more beholden to Love than the life of man; wounds cannot be cured without searching; a mixture of lie doth ever add pleasure.

Is this *Realpolitik* or despair? Whatever it is, the message of the *Essayes* is, "So be it." That's how things are in the real world, and that's how they always will be.

Let us recall one other legacy from Montaigne and Bacon. Both men were authors. Therefore, it follows that, having invented a form, both proceeded to muck it up. As we have seen, neither could let an essay alone once it had been written. This habit is arguably a virtue in Montaigne and not fatal in Bacon, but its implications are ominous. The constant revision implies a change in the conception of the essay from the enactment of a process to something that suspiciously resembles literature—perhaps an oration propped up like a scarecrow on the scaffolding of its *dispositio*.

To turn the essay into literature is to domesticate it—to make it not very different from a letter by Seneca or one of Plutarch's *moralia*. Recall Florio's use of the word "discourse" as a rough synonym for "essay"; The usage is pregnant with future confusion. John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is splendid philosophy. It might even be called an "essay" on the basis of its being an exploration of its subject, but if it is so called, any work of philosophy short of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* can be called an essay. Its proper title is obviously "discourse," maybe *Abhandlung*.

To turn the essay into literature is also to encourage authors to display beautiful—or delicately anguished, or nostalgic, or ironic, or outraged, or extroverted, or misanthropic—souls, or, alternatively, to create prose confections, oxymorons of languid rhythms and fevered images.

Yet despite all such temptations, the essay has tended to remain true to its heritage. I mean not that essays are products of what you might call "troubled times" but that the essay was born from a moment of profound, even terrifying, doubt, and that its rhetoric has often been adopted by authors who have sensed the power of the forces of dissolution. Matthew Arnold entitled his most famous collection of essays



Culture and Anarchy, and Joan Didion named her first collection from the apocalyptic image in Yeats's poem "The Second Coming": *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*.

Essays are written on an infinite variety of subjects from infinitely various points of view. However, time and time again, the essay reverts to its original forms—on the one hand to the Montaignian enactment of the process of self-realization in a world without order: "I do not paint [my subject's] being, I paint his passing . . . from day to day, from moment to moment." And on the other hand, to Baconian assertiveness in a world that threatens to reduce assertions to black comedy: "I will do such things . . . what they are, I know not, but they shall be the terrors of the earth."

The 18th century approved the idea of cool detachment from the malaise of the times. Addison and Steele are seemingly "men of sentiment" in *The Tatler*. Under the surface, however, lies the old motif of the search for the self. Steele concludes *The Tatler* with the image of the world as labyrinth: "I must confess, it has been a most exquisite pleasure to me . . . to enquire into the Seeds of Vanity and Affectation, to lay before my Readers the Emptiness of Ambition: In a Word, to trace Humane Life through all its Mazes and Recesses." *The Spectator* has even more obvious relations to its ancestry. A spectator is someone who withholds assent—a skeptic, an observer, an outsider. This is exactly the point made by Addison in the introduction to the new journal: "I live in the World rather as a Spectator of Mankind, than as one of the species . . . I have acted in all the Parts of my Life as a looker-on, which is the Character I intend to preserve in this Paper."

For the most part, *The Spectator* preserves its detachment, but occasionally there is a powerful updraft of emotion. The terror—or the malaise—of the world makes people want to be spectators, but as Werner Heisenberg has shown, spectators get tangled up in the things they are observing. The following comment, from *Specta-*

tor number 420, is directly traceable to the tangling of human motive with the world that science has revealed. It is all the more striking because it is not what you would expect from an 18th-century spectator:

If . . . we contemplate those wide Fields of Ether, that reach in height as far from *Saturn* as to the fixt stars, and run abroad almost to an infinitude, our Imagination finds its Capacity filled with so immense a Prospect . . . [it] puts itself upon the Stretch to comprehend it. But if we yet rise higher, and consider the fixt Stars as so many Oceans of Flame and still discover new Firmaments and new Lights, that are sunk further in those unfathomable Depths of *Ether*, so as not to be seen by the strongest of our Telescopes, we are lost in . . . a Labyrinth of Suns and Worlds, and confounded with the Immensity and magnificence of Nature . . . Let a Man try to conceive the different bulk of an Animal, which is twenty, from another which is a hundred times less than a Mite, or to compare, in his Thoughts, a length of a thousand Diameters of the Earth, with that of a Million, and he will quickly discover that he has no . . . Measure in his Mind, adjusted to such extraordinary Degrees of Grandeur or Minuteness. The Understanding, indeed, opens an infinite Space on every side of us, but the Imagination, after a few faint efforts, is immediately at a stand, and finds her self swallowed up in the immensity of the Void that surrounds it.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the spectator becomes a refugee. Charles Lamb's *Elia* solves his problems by infantile regression. He is no more ashamed of this habit than Montaigne was of revealing inner monstrosities. Regression is the secret of his modest success. Lamb explains: "The impressions of infancy had burnt into him, and he resented the impertinence of manhood. These were weaknesses; but such as they were, they are a key to explicate some of his writings."

The addiction of *Elia* to medicinally objectified feelings of his creator. Charles Lamb went through a bout of madness himself and lived with a sister who had murdered their mother in a fit of insanity. But the fantasies don't quite work. Reality is always breaking in. In "Dream Children: A Reverie," *Elia* recalls an interview with two imaginary children

named Alice and John. The children ask about their dead mother, also named Alice and also imaginary:

... suddenly, turning to Alice, the soul of the first Alice looked out at her eyes with such a reality of re-presentment, that I became in doubt which of them stood there before me, or whose that bright hair was; and while I stood gazing, both of the children gradually grew fainter to my view, receding, and still receding, till nothing at last but two mournful features were seen in the uttermost distance, which, without speech, strangely impressed upon me the effects of speech: "We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. . . . We are only what might have been. . . ."

"Dream Children" is affecting, but it is almost literature. Emerson comes closer, I think, than Lamb does to the scope and brilliance—and the breezy solipsism—of Montaigne. Speaking of the achievements of Plato, Shakespeare, and Milton, Emerson creates one of the great literary puns: "I dare; I also will essay to be." Writing an essay is an exercise in self-fashioning.



The sentiment is pure Montaigne. In *Nature*, Emerson expands the image: "Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those enquiries he would put on. He acts it as life,

before he apprehends it as truth." "Experience" recreates the terror of a problematic world: "Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight. . . . All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghost-like, we glide through nature, and should not know our place again."

Emerson's title—"Experience"—invokes Baconian empiricism only to reject it. The metaphor of the infinite stair recalls Addison's image of the self "swallowed up

in the immensity of the void that surrounds it." It also anticipates the infinite library of Babel imagined in the 20th century by Jorge Luis Borges.

In the later 19th century, the essay underwent a mutation. The prose poem can be defined as literature's revenge on the essay—an essay in which style has become substance. You can see the beginning of the prose poem as early as Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*. The body of the animal begins to push through the chrysalis with De Quincey's *Confessions*, and it unfurls its iridescent wings and flaps them in Walter Pater's *Renaissance*. But the prose poem appears first in full lepidopteran glory in France: in Baudelaire's *Le spleen de Paris* and Rimbaud's *Les illuminations*. From there it migrates back to the English-speaking world. We are reminded by William Gass's *On Being Blue* of its flight across the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean to the New World.

One other modern development of the genre must be recognized. It is the topical essay—brief, pointed, often amusing, and closely related to a theme, event, or personality of current interest. Bacon's essay "Of Friendship" is a prototype for the form. It did not begin by being topical, but in its final, much-augmented form it commemorates his lifelong attachment to Sir Tobie Matthew. "Of Plantations" is explicitly topical, being a consideration of issues raised by the Virginia colony. The topical essay also owes much to Addison and Steele. That is not surprising, because its native habitat is the newspaper. The Homeric catalogue of its modern practitioners includes Art Buchwald, Mary McGrory, Ralph Kilpatrick, David Broder, Russell Baker, Carl Rowan, James Reston, William Raspberry, Ellen Goodman, and George Will. This catalogue moves us to the present, which is, after all, the main interest of any essay, including an essay on the essay. I suppose most modern essays are Baconian and Addisonian, but the Montaignian essay is still impressively alive.

Much scholarship appears in the form



of—you are correct—the critical essay. This, of course, raises the question of what the word “article” refers to. William Gass has solved the problem: “The essay,” he writes, “is obviously the opposite of that awful object, ‘the article’ . . . [whose] appearance is proof of the presence, nearby, of the Professor, the way one might, perceiving a certain sort of speckled egg, infer that its mother was a certain sort of speckled bird.”

Speckled birds aside, many of the classic works of our age are essays. I am thinking, for example, of Wallace Stevens’s “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Leslie Fiedler’s “Come Back to the Raft Again, Huck, Honey,” Roland Barthes’s “Eiffel Tower,” Tom Wolfe’s “Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby,” Martin Heidegger’s “The Thing,” R. Buckminster Fuller’s “Grunch of Giants,” Werner Heisenberg’s “Abstraction in Modern Science,” and Robert Nozick’s “Fiction,” which is a non-fictional essay written by a

fictional character who is still asking the Emersonian question: “Must there be a top floor somewhere, a world that is itself, not created in someone else’s fiction? Or can the hierarchy go on infinitely?”

Nozick’s question seems to me to capture the fascination of the essay for our time. An essay is not an oration or an *Abhandlung* or a prose poem. It is “essaying to be,” in Emerson’s conceit, and “thought thinking about itself” in Heidegger’s. It is the enactment of the process of accommodation between the world and the “I,” and thus it is consciousness realizing itself.

A few years ago I wrote a book of essays called *Entering the Maze: Identity and Change in Modern Culture*. The title and subtitle did not take much thought; they seemed inevitable. I might have written a novel. I was never even tempted to do so. To choose fiction is to assert that you know the difference between fiction and fact, while I wanted to dramatize the constant redrawing of the line between the two that is taking place in modern culture. Maybe

fiction is possible in societies that change slowly. Maybe that is why the novel was popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. But who, today, knows the difference between the real, and what was real, and what is not—or not yet—real?

If you think about the novel, you will see that it has taken paths in the 20th century that lead in the direction of the essay. One kind of novel moves toward a record of hallucinations—I think of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, William Gaddis’s *The Recognitions*, John Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy*. Another type of novel records a special type of hallucination—a vision of a future presumed to be real—*Erewhon*, *Brave New World*, 1984. Yet another type aspires to the condition of news, for example, *In Cold Blood*. There is also the tendency, apparently irresistible since Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist*, for novelists to pack their work with essays spoken by characters or by a figure whom, in deference to the fondness of the present age for critical terms, I will label “the intrusive author.” Some novels, in fact, seem to consist of almost nothing but essays. Given these tendencies in the novel, why not write essays from the beginning?

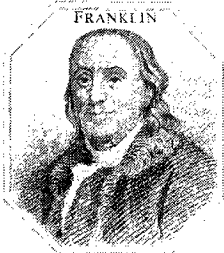
But I would like to end with some more challenging notion. I do not think we live in a solid, empirical world of the sort Bacon dangled tantalizingly in front of readers of *The Advancement of Learning* even as he demonstrated that it was an illusion. We live in a world of changes and shadows, a world where the real dissolves as we reach for it and meets us as we turn away. It is a world of mazes and illusions and metaphors and idols and stairways that proceed upward and downward to infinity.

We live at a time much like the 16th century. It is a time of immense destructive and constructive change, and there is no way of knowing whether the destructive or the constructive forces are more powerful. It is a time when the world looks like an unweeded garden and doubt is a condition of consciousness. The essay is as uniquely suited to expressing this contemporary mode of being-in-culture as it



was when Montaigne began writing the *Apology for Raimond Sebond*.

But what *is* the essay? If there is such a thing as an essential essay—a *real* Proteus—it changes into so many shapes so unlike the real one that it requires an act of



faith to believe the shapes merely variations on a single underlying identity. For this reason, of course, Proteus adopted the strategy of change in the first place. People who lack faith will turn away convinced that nothing is there.

We, however, will remember the advice of Cyrene: "The more he turns himself into different shapes, the more you, my son, must hold on to those strong chains."

Holding on may be important. If the essay is an enactment of the creation of the self—if we must essay to be—and the essay

does not exist, then you might legitimately ask whether that which the essay enacts can be said to exist. The epigraph of the last *Spectator* is from Persius: "*Respue quod non es*," "Throw away what you are not." It is good advice, but it assumes that, after you throw everything superfluous away, something is left.

If you have bound Proteus and all the changes have occurred, and if he returns to his own shape, he will have already answered your first question: Something is there. But is it? Maybe you are seeing only another counterfeit, another Idol.


That's the way things are, and the essay is the most expressive literary form of our age because it comes closest to being what all literature is supposed to be—an imitation of the real. You can vex the essay and drive it to extremities. Maybe the result will be nothing. Your action will be doubtful, but in the real world, to get a piece of the action, you, however doubtful, must follow the advice: "Hold on."

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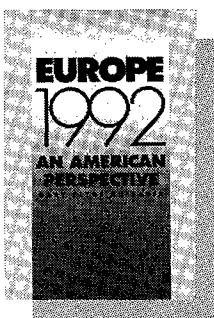
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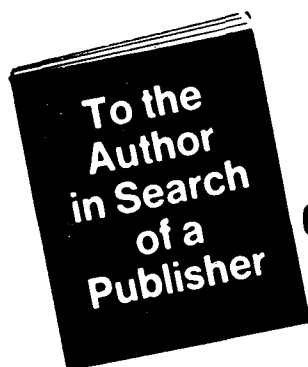
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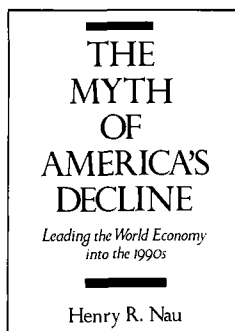
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