

Enjoying the Literate Conversation—A Meditation on Essays **Sean Arthur Joyce**

Read an essay? Why? You might ask. Well, first off, let's dispense with the notion that essays have anything to do with the loathsome book reports you were forced to do in school. If poetry can be described as "a conversation between the poet and God," essays could be described as "a lively conversation between friends with inquiring minds."

As Paul Graham points out in his excellent discourse on essays, an essay doesn't necessarily have to adopt the legalistic mindset of establishing and then defending a position. When Michel de Montaigne first set down his thoughts in the 16th century on subjects as varied as cannibalism, thumbs, smells and the art of conversation, he made it clear that it was not an attempt to have the last word on the topic in question. "To my taste the most fruitful and most natural exercise of our minds is conversation. ...I move towards the man who contradicts me: he is instructing me." It's an idea worth exercising in these corporatist times, when everything is reduced to monoculture terms so that it can be easily exploited in a 30-second ad spot. By contrast, Montaigne's intellectual modesty led him to call his musings "essays," from the French verb "assayer," meaning "to try."

My sister once found for me an antique volume called *Essays of Our Times*, published in 1928—one of those rare old books I hoard like a treasure. The Introduction notes the rapid progression from Montaigne's open-ended approach to the more self-assured mode of English essayists, starting with Francis Bacon in 1597, whose ideas "are pared to the brevity and crispness of aphorisms." This book cites Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* as the first to seize upon the essay's entertainment potential in the 17th century. This potential was more fully exploited with the advent of the periodical in the 18th century, in particular *The Spectator*, founded in 1711 by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Its mission statement was "to enliven morality with wit, and to temper wit with morality... to bring philosophy out of the closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and coffee houses."

That being said, the essay is a highly useful vehicle for social commentary and satire, as evident by efforts of writers as diverse as Jonathan Swift, George Orwell and Bertrand Russell, to name only a few. Given that the essay is possibly the most personal of all writing genres, it may even approach the thundering tone of invective. In his 1946 essay, *Why I Write*, Orwell explained: "...in a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books... As it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer." Desperate times call for desperate measures, and Orwell was writing during a time of emergent fascism, just as we are. Some of my own essays (*Hitler's Ghost*, *The Poetics of Dissent*) have arisen from a similar sense of outrage at

injustice—a frequently cited motive of writers for everything from novels to poetry. A graceful modern synthesis of Baconian aphorism and Orwellian diatribe is Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Poetry as Insurgent Art*.

The essay since Montaigne has become possibly the most flexible genre in writing. *Essays of Our Times* notes Christopher Morley's observation that an essay is "a mood rather than a form": "In essence it is something between a lyric and a conversation: it has the lyric's clairvoyant power to reveal the truth in a flash of insight, and it has the mellow human quality of all good talk." It's a definition that echoes Ferlinghetti's aphorism of poetry as arising "to ecstasy somewhere between speech and song." It is a piece of "shortish" writing that defies easy categorization. As Carl Van Doren explains, the essay stands alone among genres as lacking concrete rules. "It may be of any length, breadth, depth, weight, density, colour, savour, odour, appearance, importance, value or uselessness which you can or will give it. Nothing human... is alien to it."

In the 21st century the Internet has replaced the coffee houses of the 18th or even 20th centuries as the main sphere of public discourse and debate. It's hard to say whether the overall poor quality of writing on the web is a reflection of the medium or of a half-starved public education system, or both. Whatever the medium, as Van Doren pointed out, at the fundamental level it's about the age-old urge to communicate. The essay "is a communication," and the essayist a kind of jazz prose stylist whose "truth must have a tone, his speech... a rhythm which are his and solely his." And hers.

That essays have fallen into disinterest by the populace is, to me, yet another sign of a civilization in decline, a culture impoverished by design. Informed discourse and a questioning mind are the essay's hallmarks. Not surprising the corporate and governmental elites don't want too much of that going on.

My own essays have careened from Orwellian outrage to the shamanistic ecstasy of Ferlinghetti. Never one to colour between the lines, for me words are colours in a palette, chords and notes on a guitar. Rules must be learned only so that they may be properly broken. Categories are for accountants and bureaucrats at best, lazy minds at worst. What I write veers from awestruck meditation to soul-screams of rage to dimension-hopping metaphysical speculation. A great essay, like a great poem, Ferlinghetti reminds us, recognizes "the totalitarianism of the rational mind and breaks through it."

SOURCES

- *Essays of Our Times*, selected and edited by Sharon Brown, Brown University, published by Scott, Foresman and Company, Chicago, Atlanta, New York, 1928, out of print.
- *Poetry as Insurgent Art*, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, New Directions Books, New York and San Francisco, 2007, available to order online at www.citylights.com
- *The Art of Conversation*, essay by Michel de Montaigne, available in *The Complete Essays*, Penguin Classics, 1993, or online at <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/ph302/philosophers/montaigne.html>
- *Why I Write*, essay by George Orwell, available in *George Orwell: Essays*, Penguin Modern Classics, UK edition, 2000, or online at www.george-orwell.org
- *The Compleat Angler*, Izaak Walton and Charles Cotton, available online at <http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/walton/index.html>

LINKS:

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