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GOOD PROSE

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ESSAYS

I awoke one morning to discover that I was an essayist. It was not what I had in mind for myself, to be painfully frank. I had published a book, The Thing Itself: On the Search for Authenticity, *which I had imagined as—well, treatise is certainly too strong a word. Meditation? Maybe. But really I had simply thought of it as a book. Now I discovered that it was an essay. Actually, some reviewers said it was a series of essays. I had thought of these pieces as united by their theme, and indeed had written them that way. But the subjects ranged from antiques to climate change to television news to unicorns. I had to admit that they could be read independent of the order in which I had so deliberately put them.*

As an essayist friend of mine has pointed out, one of the problems with the essay, as a form, is that everyone has written one. You can easily make your way through life without writing a novel or a poem, but it is hard to get out of high school without writing an essay. It thus becomes an unexalted endeavor. And yet strangely enough the essay is an outsider's genre. Essays tend to be critical, subversive of something or other, even if it is just the latest fashion in sunglasses.

In the family of writers, essayists play poor cousins to writers of fic-

tion or narrative nonfiction. But great things have been accomplished in essays, which are the natural medium of ideas. Essays yield many of the nuggets of wisdom that inform everyday life, including the one line of Emerson's that everyone knows: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." This observation, the schoolboy's friend, might also serve as a credo for the essayist. Essays are a congenial form for the divided mind. Once, years ago, I was teaching a course in English literature. By midsemester the students knew me quite well. One morning I was groping for a phrase, "And, and . . ." "And yet*?" a voice said helpfully. Only then did I realize that "and yet" had become my signature idiom, emblem of the contradictions that I wanted the students to see on every hand. Emblem, too, of the contradictions within my own skull. Essayists tend to argue with themselves. The inner dialogue that might be suppressed in other writing finds a forum here. Montaigne blessed the form when he said, "If I knew my own mind, I would not make essays. I would make decisions."*

—RT

There is something you want to say, and yet you are dogged by the perennial questions—sometimes useful, but sometimes fatal—that can visit any writer. Who am I to be writing this? Who asked me? And cruelest of all, Who cares?

When you write about your own ideas, you put yourself in a place that can feel less legitimate than the ground occupied by reporters or even by memoirists, who are, or ought to be, authorities on their subjects. An all-purpose term describes efforts at sharing your mind: the essay. As an essayist you can some-

times feel like a public speaker who must build his own stage and lectern. Essays are self-authorizing. This is the dilemma but also the pleasure of the form. The chances are that nobody asked for your opinion. But if your idea is fresh, it will surprise even someone, perhaps an assigning editor, who did ask.

Most good essays transcend argument. *Thoreau argues in favor of walking, says we need to spend more time in nature* might be the unhelpful gloss of the great essay "Walking." All its wide-ranging declarations live through the force of personal conviction. Most of the work that we call personal essay goes beyond logic and fact into the sovereign claims of idiosyncrasy. This is not to suggest that essays should be illogical, but they may be, and generally should be, *extra*-logical—governed by associative more than by strictly linear thought. Writers who are used to the strictures and scruples of journalism can find themselves stymied by the essay, inhibited by the freedom thrust upon them.

The great essayists of the past have in their various ways established the contemporary essayist's rights. Montaigne virtually invented the form. Emerson and Thoreau defined it for America, and never before or since has the essay had such cultural sway. *Walden*, though a full-length book, is essentially an essay, or even (in its loose confederation of ideas) a collection of essays. In a classroom today, Emerson and Thoreau may be remembered as otherworldly spirits who wrote in opposition to the materialism of their time. But on the page they were swashbucklers. Thoreau might have been our best-known hermit, but if you listen to him at the start of "Walking," it is not a hermit's reticence that you encounter:

> I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute Freedom and Wildness, as contrasted with a Freedom and Culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one . . .

Thoreau revels in extravagance and hyperbole. One would pay to hear the tone of voice in which he read his work aloud—as he often did, despite his stylized reclusion. "Walking" debuted as a lecture in 1851. It is laced with humor and self-mockery. It seems likely that his stirring flights of eloquence were recognized by his audience as pieces of showmanship, appreciated as much for their theatricality as their content. Thoreau is generous with assertions. He goes on flights of imagery and speculation:

> The Hindoos dreamed that the earth rested on an elephant, and the elephant on a tortoise . . . It will not be out of place here to state, that a fossil tortoise has lately been discovered in Asia large enough to support an elephant.

In an essay by Thoreau, the "I" is the measure of all things. All its experience can be brought to bear; no subject is too small to notice or too big to contemplate. Emerson wrote even more expansively and aphoristically, and in describing the transcendentalist he contributed the ultimate metaphor for the essayist's relationship to the world: "I become a transparent eyeball."

What gives you license to write essays? Only the presence of an idea and the ability to make it your own. People speak of the "personal essay" as a form, but all essays are personal. They may make sweeping pronouncements, but they bear the stamp of an individual mind. Original ideas, those hinges on which an era turns, are rare. It is unlikely that you will write *The Origin of Species*. Or that you will be Emerson. But originality and profundity are not identical. Profound ideas bear repeating, or rediscovery, and many original ideas do not. Essays are like poems in that they may confront old wisdom in a fresh way. That Shakespeare wrote of the bittersweetness of parting did not preclude Emily Dickinson from doing so, too. Essays illustrate the truth that, just as no word has an exact synonym, no idea can be exactly paraphrased. Essays often gain their authority from a particular sensibility's fresh apprehension of generalized wisdom. But the point is not to brush aside the particular in favor of the general, not to make everything into a grand idea, but to treat something specific with such attention that it magnifies into significance. As Theodor Adorno says, ". . . the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal."

For writers, the essay can offer an escape from the tyranny of Importance. You don't need to have fought wars, climbed mountains, received the confidences of presidents; you can have the most mundane of experiences and make something that surpasses them. Some essays prove that you are free in fact to make a great deal out of nothing. In Virginia Woolf's "Street Haunting," for example, the nominal subject is the writer's errand in the early evening, a stroll to a stationer's store in search of a pencil. The stroll becomes the occasion for thought about the nature of solitude, and about the consolidation of self in the home versus the dissolution of self in the city. The small experience keeps ramifying into something else. She remembers standing on the doorstep of the stationer's and thinks, "It is always an adventure to enter a new room, for the lives and characters of its owners have distilled their atmosphere into it, and directly we enter it we taste some new wave of emotion." The reader's eye adjusts to this level of magnification. It seems to be in the nature of essays that they invite us into digressions of thought all our own. Woolf's reader today, inured to chain stores, might reflect on what it used to be like when much of the mercantile world consisted of little shops like the one she describes, when entering a store meant stepping into someone else's world.

The essayist's relationship with the reader depends, as always, on mutual trust, but trust of a special kind. In the essay, trust in the author and disagreement with the author can coexist. In an essay about essays—"She: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body"—Cynthia Ozick describes her experience of reading Emerson:

> I may not be persuaded by Emersonianism as an ideology, but Emerson—his voice, his language, his music—persuades me. . . . I may regard (or discard) the idea of the soul as no better than a puff of warm vapor. But here is Emerson on the soul: "When it breathes through [man's] intellect, it is

genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love." And then—well, I am in thrall; I am possessed; I believe.

You ask the reader to take *you* seriously, to honor your conviction even if your ideas provoke more than they persuade. You want engagement at least as much as you want belief. You welcome the silent dialogue with the reader, even if the reader is disputing with you. After all, you are often in dispute with yourself: beliefs are reached in the course of writing, and essays trace the course. "How do I know what I mean until I hear what I say?" is the familiar line. But its opposite is also true: How do I know what I *don't* mean until I hear what I say? Essays let you second-guess yourself, even contradict yourself in front of the reader. Self-doubt, fatal in so many enterprises, fortifies the essay.

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All the genres blur, but none is blurrier than the essay, and it comes in so many varieties that attempts to delineate it are constantly thwarted. In America we think of the patriarchs Emerson and Thoreau and of their sure-handed assertions about Nature and Self-Reliance. A century and a half later we have John D'Agata's anthology *The Next American Essay.* It includes one piece written entirely in lowercase and without punctuation (David Antin's manifesto, "The Theory and Practice of Post-Modernism"). Another piece, Jenny Boully's "The Body," is a bodiless text consisting entirely of footnotes to blank pages.

The line between essay and memoir is particularly porous.

You may turn to the essay as a refuge from memoir, and essays may then serve as covert memoirs: you say some things about yourself, while you generalize from your experience in ways that seem worth the reader's attention. George Orwell's "Such, Such Were the Joys" appears in his collected essays, but for most of the way it reads as a memoir of his desperate schoolboy days at the British boarding school that he calls Crossgates. Most readers would be entranced by Orwell's account of the parsimonious suppers, the cold baths, the canings. But something in the essayist wants to make statements. Orwell broadens the piece into wisdom about the nature of childhood itself, with a direct appeal to the reader's own experience (universally different, in the present day, from Orwell's): "Look back into your own childhood and think of the nonsense you used to believe and the trivialities which could make you suffer." There is something uplifting about this stance, which takes the essay beyond the uniqueness of personal experience, beyond "poor me." Orwell offers this refreshing view on the vagaries of memory: "But it can also happen that one's memories grow sharper after a long lapse of time, because one is looking at the past with fresh eyes and can isolate and, as it were, notice facts which previously existed undifferentiated among a mass of others." In this way, an essayist may make a subtle but fiercer claim for himself than can the memoirist. Orwell is not claiming to re-create the past but to understand what he remembers best. He doesn't lament the evanescence of memory. What's gone is gone, what's left behind is better. Good riddance to the stinging of the buttocks or the gnawing in the stomach. What remains is a greater lucidity in the mind.

"Historicize yourself," the essayist Christopher Cokinos ad-

vises would-be writers of memoir. He means that they should turn their memoirs into essays. In his view, conventional memoir can become a self-created prison, but the essay can illuminate both the public and the private by placing the self in the context of time, politics, ideas. A term for this mode of writing has sprung up: the "braided essay." It relies on what is meant to be artful juxtaposition. In "Castro's Beard," Jeff Porter interweaves his boyhood with Cold War events that were happening simultaneously but outside his consciousness. An account of the Soviet ships approaching Cuba with a complement of missiles is followed without transition by a paragraph taking us to a Little League game: "In the top of the third inning I am hit by a pitch."

In much of her work, Joan Didion uses the first person as a tuning fork, to pick up the vibrations of an age. Her essay "The White Album" is redolent of the social confusion of the 1960s, and a perfect example of the first person as an authenticator of experience. One passage begins with a psychiatric report: "a personality in process of deterioration with abundant signs of failing defenses and increasing inability of the ego to mediate the world of reality and to cope with normal stress." Didion breaks into the report to say: "The patient to whom this report refers is me." She goes on to acknowledge that she has been suffering from vertigo and nausea, and then says, "By way of comment I offer only that an attack of vertigo and nausea does not now seem to me an inappropriate response to the summer of 1968." And off she goes, to all sorts of what have become file-footage legends—the depredations of the "Manson family," the rise and fall of the Black Panthers, the drug-addled music scene in Los Angeles. Didion's best-known sentence, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live," begins this essay, and the theme is the inverse of that sentence. She is telling us that the narrator cannot make sense of the madness around her.

"The White Album" is another example of an essay that might be read as memoir. But the author isn't seeking self-understanding, nor does the reader wish exactly to understand her. Instead, she uses her own responses to the times as a means of trying to capture a broad truth about events. In her own mild and stylized derangement, she might be accused of participating in the mimetic fallacy: to describe chaos, write chaotically. But the chaos isn't in the writing itself, which is dramatic but measured and precise. The sense of chaos comes from her using the self as an embodiment of its surroundings. The argument for this device is simply that it accomplishes its purpose; for people who were sentient back then, it brings back the febrile state of the culture. The argument against such prose is that it enacts not egotism but egocentrism, the placing of oneself at the center of the universe.

But that follows in the great tradition of essay writing. In the essay, one steps forward. Even in the rare case where the first person doesn't appear, an individual authority is summoned, as in the magisterial critical essays of T. S. Eliot. The self as the measure of all things has its moral hazards, but the essayist needs at least a dash of Emersonian confidence, and more than a dash is useful to some.

The essayist can also appear as a figure who boasts of little in the way of heightened emotion or peculiarity of feeling. This sort of writer's whole claim on the reader is the claim of the norm: *I am but a distillation of you.*

E. B. White achieves such a presence. His essays, though rooted in midcentury America, travel well through time. His enduring love letter to New York was published just after the Second World War, when an awareness of the power of the atomic bomb had changed perceptions of just about everything. The essay, "Here Is New York," for most of its length evokes the city's charm. Toward the end that quality is named, and given a new and sinister meaning, prophetic in the aftermath of the airborne attack on the World Trade Center:

> The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy . . . All dwellers in cities must live with the stubborn fact of annihilation; in New York the fact is somewhat more concentrated because of the concentration of the city itself, and because, of all targets, New York has a certain clear priority. In the mind of whatever perverted dreamer might loose the lightning, New York must hold a steady, irresistible charm.

White and Didion may represent extremes, each admirable, in the essayist's use of the self. Atul Gawande offers an equally admirable example of the use of the professional self. Gawande is a surgeon and professor of medicine at Harvard, and he has published several books of essays on medical subjects. In "The Bell Curve," he contemplates a simple fact that most doctors find hard to discuss: that some of them are better than others. Gawande reports that the differences have become quantifiable and can be expressed in a bell curve, and he ponders the effects

on patients and doctors alike. Though it is plain that Gawande writes with an implicit authority (and no doubt with special access) because of his professional identity, he never pulls rank on the reader. When he invokes his professional status it is to wonder how he would treat the news if he himself failed to measure up to the profession's highest standards:

> If we . . . discovered that I am one of the worst, the answer would be easy: I'd turn in my scalpel. But what if I were a B–? Working as I do in a city that's mobbed with surgeons, how could I justify putting patients under the knife? I could tell myself, Someone's got to be average. If the bell curve is a fact, then so is the reality that most doctors are going to be average. There is no shame in being one of them, right?
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> Except, of course, there is.

"The Bell Curve" is of general worth for the issue it raises, and it also has great value for a writer of essays. In discovering the right place to stand in relation to his subject, Gawande accomplishes what every writer must accomplish. In his case, this means that, without removing his white coat, he becomes something more than a "professional." An essay both allows and requires you to say something more than you are entitled to say by virtue of your résumé alone.

In one of its modes—humor—the essay sometimes breaks the basic rule of nonfiction. Wit can confer the freedom to fictionalize. Ian Frazier has written distinguished reportage, but he is also a gifted social satirist. In "Thanks for the Memory," for in-

stance, he assumes the role of Bob Hope, in a parody of the comedian's vacuous public utterances, recalling a golf tournament: "The payoff was over half a billion dollars, just for me. It's one of the largest amounts of money there is."

The humorous essay often turns on self-mockery, and once you are mocking yourself, the reader is less likely to dispute your right to use hyperbole. David Sedaris, the best-known current master of the humorous essay, came to literary prominence with his "SantaLand Diaries," an essay that describes his service as one of Santa's elves at Macy's department store in New York. This piece skewers not only a commercialized Christmas holiday but the overbearing mothers and insufferable children who celebrate it. Does Sedaris overstate when he says that he told a misbehaving child that Santa would come to his house and steal his television and all his appliances? Doubtless so, but the piece rests on the absurdity of its author's role, the basic facts of which we understand to be true. It's a subtle balance; the piece would not be so funny if he were "making the whole thing up." You need to know that real pain was involved. It takes some courage to admit to having been a hired elf. Having done so, you may be forgiven a scene like the one in which Sedaris claims to have used sign language as he said to a deaf child in a loud clear voice: "SANTA HAS A TUMOR IN HIS HEAD THE SIZE OF AN OLIVE. MAYBE IT WILL GO AWAY TOMORROW BUT I DON'T THINK SO."

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What can you learn from practitioners of the essay, in all its variety? There can't be many general lessons for a form that depends so heavily on nerve and poise and on having something

idiosyncratic to say. Every essayist deals with the same general ingredients—self and experience and idea—but everyone deals with them differently. Good essayists share the ability and the confidence to use the power of their own highly specified convictions.

Edward Hoagland, although he has worked in other forms, is nonetheless known primarily for his essays. Writing in the 1970s, in a turbulent political season, Hoagland begins "Of Cows and Cambodia" by allying himself with the big stories of the hour:

> During the invasion of Cambodia, an event which may rate little space when recent American initiatives are summarized but which for many of us seemed the last straw at the time, I made an escape to the woods. The old saw we've tried to live by for an egalitarian half-century that "nothing human is alien" has become so pervasive a truth that I was worn to a frazzle. I was the massacre victim, the massacring soldier, and all the gaudy queens and freaked-out hipsters on the street.

No one gives you permission to write this way. It is like taking a bite of the apple that is the world. You do it. You get away with it. Soon experience entitles you to do it again.