

The Essayification of Everything

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It seems that the essay has become a talisman of our times. What is behind our attraction to it? Is it the essay's therapeutic properties? Because it brings miniature joys to its writer and its reader? Because it is small enough to fit in our pocket, portable like our own experiences?

I believe that the essay owes its longevity today mainly to this fact: the genre and its spirit provide an alternative to the dogmatic thinking that dominates much of social and political life in contemporary America. In fact, I would advocate a conscious and more reflective deployment of the essay's spirit in all aspects of life as a resistance against the zealous closed-endedness of the rigid mind. I'll call this deployment "the essayification of everything."

Let's start with form's beginning. The word Michel de Montaigne chose to describe his prose ruminations published in 1580 was "Essais," which, at the time, meant merely "Attempts," as no such genre had yet been codified. This etymology is significant, as it points toward the experimental nature of essayistic writing: it involves the nuanced process of trying something out. Later on, at the end of the 16th century, Francis Bacon imported the French term into English as a title for his more boxy and solemn prose. The deal was thus sealed: essays they were and essays they would stay. There was just one problem: the discrepancy in style and substance between the texts of Michel and Francis was, like the English Channel that separated them, deep enough to drown in. I've always been on Team Michel, that guy who would probably show you his rash, tell you some dirty jokes, and ask you what you thought about death. I imagine, perhaps erroneously, that Team Francis tends to attract a more buttoned-up fan base.

With such divergent beginnings, the essay has never recovered from this chronic undecidability. As a genre that emerged to accommodate the expressive needs of the Renaissance Man, the essay necessarily keeps all tools and skills at its disposal. The essayist samples more than a D.J.: a loop of the epic here, a little lyric replay there, a polyvocal break and citations from greatnesses past, all with a signature scratch on top.

There is certainly disagreement on the wobbly matter of what counts as an essay and what does not. I have generally found that for every rule I could establish about the essay, a dozen exceptions scuttle up. I recently taught a graduate seminar on the topic and, at the end of the course, to the question "What can we say of the essay with absolute certainty?", all of us, armed with our panoply of canonical essay theories and our own conjectures, had to admit that the answer is: "Almost nothing." But this is the force of the essay: it impels you to face the undecidable. It asks you to get comfortable with ambivalence.

When I say "essay," I mean short nonfiction prose with a meditative subject at its center and a tendency away from certitude. Much of the writing encountered today that is labeled as "essay" or "essay-like" is anything but. These texts include the kind of writing expected on the SAT, in seminar papers, dissertations, professional criticism or other scholarly writing; politically engaged texts or other forms of peremptory writing that insist upon their theses and leave no room for uncertainty; or other short prose forms in which the author's subjectivity is purposely erased or disguised. What

these texts often have in common is, first, their self-conscious hiding of the “I” under a shroud of objectivity. One has to pretend that one’s opinions or findings have emanated from some office of higher truth where rigor and science are the managers on duty.

Second, these texts are untentative: they know what they want to argue before they begin, stealthily making their case, anticipating any objections, aiming for air-tightness. These texts are not attempts; they are obstinacies. They are fortresses. Leaving the reader uninvited to this textual engagement, the writer makes it clear he or she would rather drink alone.

Essayism consists in a self-absorbed subject feeling around life, exercising what Theodor Adorno called the “essay’s groping intention,” approaching everything tentatively and with short attention, drawing analogies between the particular and the universal. Regular, everyday phenomena — what we eat, things upon which we stumble, things that Pinterest us — rub elbows implicitly with the Big Questions: What are the implications of the human experience? What is the meaning of life? Why something rather than nothing? Like the Father of the Essay, we let the mind and body flit from thing to thing, clicking around from mental hyperlink to mental hyperlink: if Montaigne were alive today, maybe he too would be diagnosed with A.D.H.D.

The essayist is interested in thinking about himself thinking about things. We believe our opinions on everything from politics to pizza parlors to be of great import. This explains our generosity in volunteering them to complete strangers.

In Italian, the word for essay is “saggio” and contains the same root as the term “assaggiare,” which means to sample, taste or nibble food. Today, we like to sample, taste or nibble experiences: Internet dating, speed dating, online shopping and buy-and-try consumerism, mash-ups and digital sampling, the money-back guarantee, the temporary tattoo, the test-drive, shareware. If you are not satisfied with your product, your writing, your husband, you may return/delete/divorce it. The essay, like many of us, is notoriously noncommittal.

Essayism, when imagined as a constructive approach to existence, is a blanket of possibilities draped consciously on the world.

Essayism is predicated on at least three things: personal stability, technocratic stability and societal instability.

Essayism, as an expressive mode and as a way of life, accommodates our insecurities, our self-absorption, our simple pleasures, our unnerving questions and the need to compare and share our experiences with other humans. I would argue that the weakest component in today’s essayism is its meditative deficiency. Without the meditative aspect, essayism tends toward empty egotism and an unwillingness or incapacity to commit, a timid deferral of the moment of choice. Our often unreflective quickness means that little time is spent interrogating things we’ve touched upon. The experiences are simply had and then abandoned. The true essayist prefers a more cumulative approach; nothing is ever really left behind, only put aside temporarily until her digressive mind summons it up again, turning it this way and that in a different light, seeing what sense it makes. She offers a model of humanism that isn’t about profit or progress and does not propose a solution to life but rather puts endless questions to it.

The essayification of everything means turning life itself into a protracted attempt.

The essay, like this one, is a form for trying out the heretofore untried. Its spirit resists closed-ended, hierarchical thinking and encourages both writer and reader to postpone their verdict on life. It is an invitation to maintain the elasticity of mind and to get comfortable with the world’s inherent ambivalence. And, most importantly, it is an imaginative rehearsal of what isn’t but could be.