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# The Essayification of Everything

By **Christy Wampole** May 26, 2013 3:00 pm

The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

Lately, you may have noticed the spate of articles and books that take interest in the essay as a flexible and very human literary form. These include “The Wayward Essay” and Phillip Lopate’s reflections on the relationship between essay and doubt, and books such as “How to Live,” Sarah Bakewell’s elegant portrait of Montaigne, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century patriarch of the genre, and an edited volume by Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French called “Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time.”

It seems that, even in the proliferation of new forms of writing and communication before us, 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.”

What do I mean with this lofty expression?

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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 cocksure, buttoned-up fan base, what with all the "He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to great enterprises," and whatnot.

With such divergent progenitors, 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 airtightness. 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.

What is perhaps most interesting about the essay is what happens when it cannot be contained by its generic borders, leaking outside the short prose form into other formats such as the essayistic novel, the essay-film, the photo-essay, and life itself. In his unfinished novel "The Man Without Qualities," the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Austrian writer Robert Musil coined a term for this leakage. He called it "essayism" (Essayismus in German) and he called those who live by it "possibilitarians" (Möglichkeitsmenschen). This mode is defined by contingency and trying things out digressively, following this or that forking path, feeling around life without a specific ambition: not for discovery's sake, not for conquest's sake, not for proof's sake, but simply for the sake of trying.

The possibilitarian is a virtuoso of the hypothetical. One of my dissertation advisers Thomas Harrison wrote a handsome book on the topic called "Essayism: Conrad, Musil, and Pirandello," in which he argues that the essayism Musil sought to describe was a "solution in the absence of a solution," a fuzzy response to Europe's precarity during the years he worked on his unfinishable masterpiece. I would argue that many of us in contemporary America these days are prone to essayism, in various guises, but always in the spirit of open-endedness and with serious reservations about committing to any one thing.

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. Banal, 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. And as D.I.Y. culture finds its own language today, we can recognize in it Arthur Benson’s dictum from 1922 that, “An essay is a thing which someone does himself.”

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.

I certainly don’t argue that no one is committing these days; it only takes a few moments of exposure to contemporary American political discourse to realize the extent of dogmatic commitment to this or that party, to this or that platform. However, for many, the certainty with which the dogmatists make their pronouncements feels increasingly like a bothersome vestige of the past. We can either cling rigidly to dissolving categories or we can let ambivalence wash over us, allowing its tide to carry us toward new life configurations that were inconceivable even 20 years ago. Essayism, when imagined as a constructive approach to existence, is a blanket of possibilities draped consciously on the world.

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

Montaigne certainly possessed the first. He grew up in a privileged family, spoke Latin before French, had the educational, financial and social means to lead a life of civic engagement and writing. While most of us probably didn't know fluent Latin as children (and never will) and aren't in a position to become high-ranking civil servants, we have a relatively high literacy rate and unprecedented access to technologies of communication and reserves of knowledge. Furthermore, as a counter-narrative to our supposed busy-ness, there's lots of evidence that we have plenty of idle time on our hands. Despite our search for distractions in any form, these empty hours give us time to contemplate the hardships of contemporary life. The thoughts just creep in if given the means.

Regarding technocracy, the maturation of print culture during the Renaissance meant that the great texts of Antiquity and newer philosophical, literary and scientific materials could reach a wider audience, albeit mainly composed of people of privilege. The experts of science and technology at that time siphoned some of the power that had been monopolized by the church and the crown. We could draw a similar analogy today: Silicon Valley and the technocratic business class still force the church and the state to share much of their cultural power. The essay thrives under these conditions.

As for societal instability, life outside Montaigne's château was not rosy: the Wars of Religion between Catholics and Protestants raged in France starting in the 1560s. Turmoil and uncertainty, dogmatism and blood: such circumstances make one reflect on the meaning of life, but it is sometimes too hard to look such a question right in the face. Instead, one asks it obliquely by wondering about those smallnesses that make up the human experience. Today, unresolved issues of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation and other categories have created a volatile social dynamic, and, with our current economic instability to boot, it is no wonder that throwing oneself wholeheartedly toward any particular idea or endeavor seems a risky proposition to many of us. Finally, the bloody wars of religion and ideology continue to rage on in our time. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the French writer André Malraux predicted that the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be a century

of renewed mysticism, he perhaps did not imagine that the pursuit of God would take such a politically volatile form.

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 nontextual 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.

We need a cogent response to the renewed dogmatism of today's political and social landscape and our intuitive attraction to the essay could be pointing us toward this genre and its spirit as a provisional solution. Today's essayistic tendency — a series of often superficial attempts relatively devoid of thought — doesn't live up to this potential in its current iteration, but a more meditative and measured version à la Montaigne would nudge us toward a calm taking into account of life without the knee-jerk reflex to be unshakeably right. 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.

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