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The Return of/to the Essay

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The essayist is—or should be—ruminative. He isn't monomaniacal. He is without pedantry; he is not, as they say in university English departments, "in the pro fission." The essayist might be found almost anywhere, but the last place one is likely to find him is in the pages of PMLA.

—Joseph Epstein, "Piece Work: Writing the Essay"

THE RETURN of/to the essay? With the now familiar if not obligatory slash, my title may seem largely a bow to fashion or perhaps appear to signal yet another, perhaps predictable, poststructuralist exercise in ingenuity. I hope it is more than fashionable, and I at least intend it to suggest something other than cleverness. Though my focus is the current resurgence of interest in the essay, I leave unresolved—uncontested, really—the question of the power and primacy of human agency in that return: whether we are returning to the essay, whether the essay as a form possesses some power of survival and renewal, or whether certain material and cultural conditions have coalesced to effect that return, there can be little doubt concerning both general readers' growing interest in, and writers' new commitment to, this venerable genre. That growing interest and that new commitment seem so far, however, to have had little influence on academic criticism, many of us evidently being unaware of the return of/to the essay. Here I want to consider that return and especially some of its possible implications for critical writing.

"Essays are making a remarkable literary comeback," affirms Robert Atwan, series editor of *The Best American Essays*, an important annual launched in 1986 (Foreword, Dillard x). In a recent issue of the *Sewanee Review* celebrating the essay, Scott Russell Sanders

argues that more essayists are “at work in America today, and more gifted ones, than at any time in recent decades We do not have anyone to rival Emerson or Thoreau, but in sheer quantity of first-rate work our time stands comparison with any period since the heyday of the form in the mid-nineteenth century” (659). Among the talented writers finding the form hospitable, and markets for it available, are Wendell Berry, Carol Bly, Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, Gerald Early, Gretel Ehrlich, Joseph Epstein, Elizabeth Hardwick, Edward Hoagland, Phillip Lopate, Barry Lopez, Nancy Mairs, Peter Matthieson, James McConkey, John McPhee, Cynthia Ozick, Samuel E Pickering, Jr., David Quammen, Alastair Reid, Richard Rodriguez, Richard Seizer, Paul Theroux, and Tom Wolfe. Further reflection can always turn up more names—Barbara Lazear Ascher, Joseph Brodsky, Donald Hall, Stephen Jay Gould, Scott Sanders, Susan Allen Toth, Gore Vidal, Alice Walker, and God only knows how many others, including, of course, the recently deceased Edward Abbey. Though this list is hardly exhaustive, these names suggest the range of subject matter, styles, and personalities animating the contemporary essay as it embraces nature, science, and travel writing; memoir; the familiar or personal essay; and other forms. The major point, anyway, is that for the first time in a long while “many of our best essayists are writers for whom, as Annie Dillard puts it, the essay is ‘the real work’” (Hall xiii). Dillard predicts, in fact, that “the narrative essay may become the genre of choice for writers devoted to significant literature” (Introduction xvi). However that may be, and whether or not Scott Walker is right in attributing the renaissance of interest in the essay to the form's way of telling “a more directly personal sort of truth than might be told in fiction” (vi), I wonder how many readers would dispute John Tallmadge's recent claim that “today's most exciting work is not being done in fiction but in essays, memoirs and travel writing.”

To understand this flourishing of the essay, we must make some distinctions. Though most of us no doubt think we know perfectly well what an essay is, thank you, that knowledge may prove insecure, if not actually false. As Graham Good has recently written in *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*, the very notion of this venerable form is linked with belles lettres, an archaism that conjures up the image of “a middle-aged man in a worn tweed jacket in an armchair smoking a pipe by the fire in his private library in a country house somewhere in southern England, in about 1910, maundering on about the delights of idleness, country walks, tobacco, old wine, and old books, blissfully unaware that he and his entire culture are about to be swept away by the Great War and Modern Art” (vii). The essays being written today are different, bolder, often hard-hitting, quite candid, even risky, therefore modern in tone and content.

There is at least one other common misunderstanding. Unfortunately, essays are usually lumped together with articles, columns, reviews, pieces, themes (in comp courses), and what have you; the word *essay*, in fact, has become interchangeable with each of these terms. What is enjoying “a remarkable literary comeback” is a contemporary essay that differs in quite discernible and significant ways from both the outmoded belletristic form and the article. That last difference especially fuels my speculations here concerning the prospects for a revitalized critical essay.

Admittedly, the essay form itself encourages some of the blurring of distinctions that often accompanies discussion of the genre, and it is true that some articles veer toward the essay, some essays toward the article. Fathered by Montaigne in the sixteenth century, or so it is rumored, the essay has always been, if not a bastard, certainly a loose and receptive form. Edward Hoagland describes it as “a greased pig” (25), Joseph Epstein as “a pair of baggy pants into which nearly anyone and anything can fit” (400), and Elizabeth Hardwick as a “slithery form, wearisomely vague and as chancy as trying to catch a fish in the open hand” (Introduction xv). The essay is a genre that flirts with all the other genres (Bensmaïa 96); it avoids marriage or even commitment to any one style, manner of presentation, or subject matter. It may be precisely this protean and loose character—with its marked if not promiscuous openness to diverse topics, “approaches,” and modes of expression, indeed with a receptivity and a willingness to welcome, even to embrace and consort with, many and disparate, in effect almost all, callers—that makes the essay popular and vital, which is not to say licentious.

Though we may not, then, be able to define the essay exactly (in a sense, it represents an implicit critique of the drive toward definition), we can point to some generally agreed-on and important characteristics and venture some preliminary distinctions. Rummaging around in essays—itsself an essayistic activity—you soon discover how often, and how fondly, writers write about that fecund form, as if about a lover; the essay *is*, I think, inseparable from love, and the essayist from an *amateur*. How better, in any case, to describe the essay than by emphasizing the way it foregrounds the loving self—which often constitutes its subject—and incorporates the self's personal and therefore quite particular experience, including the process of thinking, even of writing. Montaigne was perhaps “the first writer to invite the reader to catch him in the act: *Watch me thinking. Watch me writing*” (Atwan, Foreword, Hardwick ix), and those who have come after have acknowledged, indeed exploited, in their own *essais* the centrality of the thinking-writing self. The plot of the essay (the genre displays that literary feature, as well as others) remains the adventure of “a person's thought struggling to achieve some understanding of a problem” (Lopate, “Essay” 47). As more than one student of the essay has noted, it is “*essentially* a peripatetic or ambulatory form,” its activities centering around the self “traveling, pondering, reading, and remembering” (Good xii; see also Howarth). The essay thus produces the artistic or literary effect or illusion of witnessing thinking in progress, in process; it *is* the act of thinking through writing.

A delicate and precarious balance marks the essay: representing “the mind's natural flow, instead of a systematized outline of ideas” (Hoagland 25), the essay walks a fine line between seeming random movement and artful control. As William Howarth puts it, essays “fulfill but also surprise our expectations, because they are both designed and improvised. After all the preliminary study and thought, the writing process still takes unexpected turns, reveals unforeseen consequences” (642). The essay not merely allows for but actually celebrates—indeed is characterized by—surprise, interpretation, meandering, and slow discovery. Refusing to be hurried, loving to ramble and explore, the essayist, being an amiable companion, caresses and nurtures ideas, observations, and

emotions, allowing them time to develop and leaving the mind space and time enough to experience them. It is a loving kind of attention, the essay. And the work of the essayist? Perhaps it is best described as gardening for love, planting some seeds here, cultivating some ideas and feelings there, but everywhere fertilizing and pruning the prose (Atkins, "Words").

A dialectical spirit of inquiry and exploration also marks the essay. Indeed, speculative and ruminative thinking distinguishes the familiar or personal essay, the quintessential subgenre of this venerable form, from expository writing, such as defines the article, theme, and piece. Conversational and collegial, in contrast to the argumentative and competitive (if not downright combative) academic modes, the essay enjoys what Umberto Eco calls an "open form," which accommodates "several viewpoints, even contradictory viewpoints, simultaneously" (Zeiger 460). Whereas expository writing, which honors "linear, sequential procedure," "abhors ambiguity and marches to a predictable conclusion," the essay embraces the "simultaneous play of alternatives" (461).

The differences between the article and the form I have been describing are palpable. Perhaps taking their cues from Walter Pater, who (in *Plato and Platonism*) distinguishes the essay from the treatise, various writers have recently marked these differences, including Graham Good and Chris Anderson, but none more pointedly than the philosopher-novelist-essayist William H. Gass. I will quote at some length from Gass's account not because I always agree with him (though his style may be essayistic, his single-minded and absolutist privileging of the essay is not) but because his sometimes outrageous assertions point up differences we would do well to heed. The essay, he writes, is "obviously the opposite of that awful object, 'the article,'" which,

like items picked up during one's lunch hour, represents itself as the latest cleverness, a novel consequence of thought, skill, labor, and free enterprise, but never as an activity—the process, the working, the wandering. As an article, it should be striking of course, original of course, important naturally, yet without possessing either grace or charm or elegance, since these qualities will interfere with the impression of seriousness which it wishes to maintain; rather its polish is like that of the scrubbed step; but it must appear complete and straightforward and footnoted and useful and certain and is very likely a veritable Michelin of misdirection; for the article pretends that everything is clear, that its argument is unassailable, that there are no soggy patches, no illicit references, no illegitimate connections; its manners are starched, stuffy, it would wear a dress suit to a barbeque, silk pajamas to the shower; it knows, with respect to every subject and point of view it is ever likely to entertain, what words to use, what form to follow, what authorities to respect; it is the careful product of a professional, and therefore it is written as only writing can be written even if, at various times, versions have been given a dry dull voice at a conference because, spoken aloud, it still sounds like writing written

down, writing born for its immediate burial in a Journal. It is a relatively recent invention, this result of scholarly diligence (2526)

The form disparaged by Gass is, of course, that privileged by academics; it is, in fact, the standard by which professional writing is judged. I would insist, contra Gass, however, that the article is valuable and necessary—it alone may be capable of effectively accommodating and communicating historical and philological scholarship (Anderson, "Evidence" 305)—but at the same time I would hope that academic critics could not only be persuaded to distinguish between the essay and the article (however difficult it may be to do so in individual cases) but also come to recognize what losses are entailed in privileging the article. Must we choose absolutely between these forms, either, like Gass, rejecting the article or, like most academics, ignoring the essay, its rich tradition and its impressive possibilities? What might happen if academic critics (re)turned to the essay for at least some of their work? Might essays someday appear in the pages of *PMLA* ?

Not if Chris Anderson is right. In a recent piece in *College English* significantly entitled "Hearsay Evidence and Second-Class Citizenship," Anderson ponders why "the essay as a form [has] declined in the academic world, even as it has gained in popularity outside the academic world" (300). The response he offers is predictable (and for me unappealing): academic writing is now necessarily so technical, specialized, and recondite that it "excludes the casual reader" (303), whose interests and needs often mesh perfectly, however, with what the essay is and has to offer. We are left with two worlds, forms, sets of expectations, and ways of writing: they may be equal, but they are separate, and the twain shall not meet. "I mean only to account for the success of the essay in some circles," writes Anderson, "and its inappropriateness in others" (307). This segregationist effort may, in some ways, be attractive—it seeks to avoid the privileging of either the essay or the article, and, as I have said, the article allows for certain work that the essay seems ill equipped to accommodate—but are we content merely to "live and let live" (Anderson 307), an attitude that will surely confirm the essay's "second-class citizenship"?

Though critical writing, manifest mainly as academic articles, has not really participated in the "remarkable literary comeback" of the essay, some signs appear of new or renewed interest among scholars in the issues, desires, and needs that the essay, especially in its more modern, tougher-minded forms, appears well equipped to engage.¹ Interestingly, these signs often appear in the places least likely to seem hospitable to the essayistic, at least according to Anderson. In this regard, consider Geoffrey Hartman and his well-known pleas for a "creative criticism" that, at its best, might constitute the literature of "imaginative reason" that Matthew Arnold dreamed of, with the critical essay perhaps achieving the status of "intellectual poetry." Hartman's position owes much, of course, to Georg Lukács's "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" (1910), which seeks to establish that "the essay has a form which separates it, with the rigor of a law, from all other forms" (9). Fundamental to the essay, according to Lukács (as well as Hartman), is irony, for the critical essayist is "always speaking about the ultimate problems of life, but in a

tone which implies that he is only discussing pictures and books, only the inessential and pretty ornaments of life—and even then not their innermost substance but only their beautiful and useless surface” (9). Lukács thus gives the critical essay deep and vital substance, and in “Literary Commentary as Literature,” included in *Criticism in the Wilderness*, Hartman elaborates on this insight, brooding on questions fundamental to the genre. Might the essay have not only “a form of its own” but also

a shape or perspective that removes it from the domain of positive knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) to give it a place beside art, yet without confusing the boundaries of scholarship and art? Is it at least possible for the essay to muster enough vigor to institute a renewal of ideas... while remaining essayistic, distinct from a scientific philosophy's striving for absolute truths? (191)

Complicating our conventional but too easy dichotomizing of literature and criticism, regarding them, in fact, as engaged in a relation of “mutual domination” and “interchangeable supremacy,” Hartman believes that the critical essay not only is about art or a work of art but is also—or at least can be—itsself a work of art.

Sooner or later we will have to face the question Hartman insists on, and that concerns an “answerable style.” How, he asks, “can the critic respond to the extraordinary language-event and still maintain a prose of the center?” Even if Hartman overstates his case, “the spectacle of the polite critic dealing with an extravagant literature, trying so hard to come to terms with it in his own tempered language, verges on the ludicrous” (*Criticism* 157, 155).

Deconstruction has, if nothing else, taught us to question and problematize the oppositions and hierarchies we erect between literature and criticism. Wary of the closure and totality connoted by the idea of the book, deconstructionists might, in principle, be drawn, like Hartman, to the open-endedness, skepticism, and critical spirit that characterize the essay form: it resists easy definition (of itself, its subject matter, its “conclusions”), avoids coming to rest in some positive truth or absolute knowledge, remains wary of systems and systematizing, and not only acknowledges but also embraces and even celebrates the uncertainty and ambiguity that deconstruction tirelessly reveals all about us. Chris Anderson has pointed to the considerable irony here, for whereas “the form of the essay, far more than the form of the article, acknowledges uncertainty and ambiguity,” poststructuralist theorists “use the form of the article to make their claims about indeterminacy.” The result deserves consideration, for these theorists become “involved... in the contradiction of arguing for gaps and uncertainties in hard and fast ways. They are dogmatic about indeterminacy, insistent. The systematic form of the article lends itself well to their scholastic demonstrations of the inadequacy of language.” The essay, on the other hand, as Anderson notes, “is by definition an attempt. It is, in Emerson's phrase, a reflection of the 'Man thinking'; that is, man [sic] in the act of contemplation” (“Evidence” 305). Or as William Gass puts it, the essay embodies “an activity—the process, the working, the wondering. It doesn't pretend that

everything is clear and worked out." Moreover, it "turns round and round upon its topic, exposing this aspect then that; proposing possibilities, reciting opinions, disposing of prejudice and even of the simple truth itself as too undeveloped, not yet of an interesting age" (25).

The temperamental affinity between reconstruction and the essay has recently been elaborated by W. Wolfgang Holdheim. Despite his own rejection of deconstruction, Holdheim acknowledges that deconstructive efforts have marked the essay from its beginnings. In Montaigne, as he notes, "the essay is less a genre than quite deliberately an antigenre, designed to flaunt the prescriptiveness in literary matters which had been inherited from a rationalistic rhetorical tradition" (20). Holdheim maintains that Montaigne was engaged in nothing less than "an *Abbau* of his tradition (the term has lately been translated as 'deconstruction'). It is an active deconstruction in the genuine sense: a clearing away of rubbish, of reified sedimentations, so that issues may once again be laid bare in their concreteness." Montaigne's "radical presentation of discontinuity is very much a reaction against uncritically accepted accumulations of continuity; his insistence on the uniquely diverse and particular is directed against too exclusive a concern with universals" (21). The essay and deconstruction thus share a similar demystifying, defamiliarizing, estranging agenda. Moreover, argues Holdheim since the essay "presents itself, among other things, as a dialectic between developing idea and elucidated occasion," it demonstrates "the act of knowing *in flagranti*" (30); the essay is, in fact, "the hermeneutic genre par excellence" (28).

But there are differences, important ones, between deconstructive and essayistic assumptions, despite the affinities I have noted. Graham Good argues that deconstructionists, as well as other poststructuralists, are likely to dismiss the traditional essay as "a combination of the bourgeois liberal-humanist subject and a naive-realist epistemology believing in accurate linguistic construction of 'real' objects." The essay is skeptical, but its skepticism concerns accounts of reality other than "its own, which stem from personal experience. That is the essay's ultimate 'ground,'" contends Good, who notes that deconstruction rejects every idea of ground (18081). I don't have the space here to pursue such differences, especially the essay's central focus on the individual self, on the apparent freedom and the lived, personal experience of the self, but I will say that I see no necessity to accept Good's sense of the essay as locked into some naive, innocent notion about self or of deconstructionists as inimical to the essay or to all aspects of its tradition. Still, this issue of the self, or the subject, will have to be confronted if theory and the essay are ever to come together productively, for theory has taught us that the self is not the independent, unitary, and stable identity, origin of meaning, and transcendent creature of history and culture that the essay seems (at least often) to presuppose.

That poststructuralists can write in, and advance, the form of the essay is attested by the success of Roland Barthes, whose later works—especially *The Pleasure of the Text*, *A Lover's Discourse*, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, and *Camera Lucida*—extend and

develop the possibilities inherent in the form inaugurated by Montaigne. These texts, claims Réda Bensmaïa in *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*, have “contributed more vigorously to the renewal of that ‘anti-genre’... than [have those] of any other contemporary writer” (viii). Whether or not this is true, it seems hard to dispute Bensmaïa's claim that, thanks to Barthes, the *essai* —“the polysemic word par excellence” (96)—(re)emerges as “an *a-generic* text or as *anti-genre*,” not a genre at all but “rather the one from which all others are generated” (90). In any case, instead of writing in article form, Barthes “performs his argument, disposing, proposing and abandoning theories, dramatizing the processes of thought, refusing to reduce the text to a manufactured thesis” (Anderson, “Evidence” 305). Much the same can be said of the essays of Geoffrey Hartman.

Still, despite the affinities between the essay and deconstruction, as well as the essayistic structure of at least some of Hartman's and Barthes's efforts, there remains a gap—more like a yawning chasm—between all forms of academic criticism, not just the poststructuralist, and the essays enjoying a “remarkable literary comeback.” Can the essay, with both its formal and its historical ties to the personal and familiar, to accessibility as well as grace of expression, accommodate contemporary criticism and the critic's burden of historical and theoretical knowledge and of foreign-sounding language? What about that crucial matter, raised by poststructuralism, of the different understandings of the self that apparently mark the work of essayists and theorists? Lévi-Strauss, Benveniste, Lacan, and Foucault, among others, argue powerfully that the self is not a transcendent, unitary subject but an intersection of historical and political practices and an effect of their discourses. The fate of the critical essay may lie just here. Whatever happens in the future, and I speculate on that below, academic criticism continues to take the form of the article, with only some isolated exceptions (so far). These include the experimental “creative criticism” done by such different figures as Barthes, Gass, Hartman, Harold Bloom, and Ihab Hassan. At least some of these critics write out of an essay tradition quite different from the Anglo-American. I mean the European tradition of the speculative or philosophical essay, which supplies the form with an intellectual substance and insight too little known here and in England and whose practitioners include Lukács, Adorno, Benjamin, Valéry, Sartre, E. M. Cioran, and Derrida. As a result, the kind of *essai* that Hartman praises and that he and Barthes write, for instance, seems a far cry from the familiar or personal essay we know and increasingly revere again. The paratactic style of Adorno and Benjamin, in particular, makes them appear difficult to readers accustomed to linear progression, but these writers occupy a vital position in the history of the essay. Benjamin's critical work in *Illuminations* and his travel and autobiographical essays in *One-Way Street* represent an impressive body of reflection done in consistently artful form. Adorno, similarly, insists that his frequently open and experimental work is essayistic; “The Essay as Form” is a powerful assertion of the essay's claims to philosophical significance.

I am hardly more content to rest with the segregation in critical writing of the philosophical (and speculative) from the familiar (and personal) than of the essay from

the professionally privileged article. But as much as I would like us in this poststructuralist age to be aware of and to appreciate the essay and its rich tradition, I grant that the critical essay cannot hope or expect to return to the simpler state and comely form practiced in the nineteenth century; "the amount of positive historical knowledge we are expected to carry along is too great" (Hartman, *Fate* 270). Like Hartman, I cling to the possibility that the "dignity" given the critical essay by Hazlitt, Pater, Ruskin, and others need not be lost "in its more specialized and burdened form" (*Fate* 270). Might there be, I want to suggest, the possibility of a *familiar (essay) estranged*—a reorientation of the essay in English: not a flouting of its rich artistic heritage or of the dignity it has earned—no concession to the article, in other words—but a return to the essay that acknowledges, maybe even embraces, the unavoidable burden of knowledge both historical and theoretical?

The "personal criticism" sought, and to some degree made available, by feminist theory provides both hope for, and one direction toward, the achievement of such a possibility; this theory is struggling with the very questions of self and identity that must engage those of us interested in a rapprochement of the essayistic and the theoretical. Consider, for example, Jane Tompkins's recent "Me and My Shadow," which gives voice to the frustrations of women in particular but also, I think, of men. Tompkins seizes the opportunity "to write about her feelings," which up to that point fear of embarrassment had not allowed her to do.¹ "The problem is that you can't talk about your private life in the course of doing your professional work. ...Well, I'm tired of the conventions that keep discussions of epistemology, or James Joyce, segregated from meditations on what is happening outside my window or inside my heart" (169). Tompkins ascribes this repression of the personal to regnant masculinist conventions: "The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempt to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way" (169). What Tompkins desires and seeks, though she does not refer to the form, is what characterizes the essay and distinguishes it from the article and from the article's apparent objectivity, impersonalism, and rigid demarcations.² "Sometimes," she declares, "when a writer introduces some personal bit of story into an essay, I can hardly contain my pleasure. I love writers who write about their own experience. I feel I'm being nourished by them, that I'm being allowed into a personal relationship with them, and say, yes, that's how it is" (170). Accordingly, the criticism Tompkins wants to write "would always take off from personal experience, would always be in some way a chronicle of my hours and days, would speak in a voice which can talk about everything, would reach out to a reader like me and touch me where I want to be touched." Tompkins wants, in other words, "to speak in what Ursula LeGuin calls the mother tongue"—and that speech, I suggest, is the form of the essay. For whereas "the dialect of the father tongue [that is, the article is the language of thought that seeks objectivity," Tompkins quotes LeGuin as saying, the mother tongue "spoken or written expects an answer." It is conversation: "The mother tongue is language not as mere communication, but as relation, a relationship. It connects..." (17374). What authoritarian discourse ignores—what the article, an instance of such discourse, cannot indulge—is "the human frailty of the speaker, his body, his emotions, his history; the

movement of intercourse with the reader—acknowledgment of another person's presence, her feelings, her needs. This 'authoritative' language speaks as though the other person weren't there. Or perhaps more accurately, it doesn't bother to imagine who... is listening to our talk" (17576).

To embrace personal criticism at this point would seem to require, as a corollary, a return to the essay. And a commitment to that form, no less than to personal criticism, implicitly challenges, perhaps even undermines, professional values. Given the profession's privileging of the article, of "objectivity" and neutrality, such a decision may be seen, in fact, as a political act of no mean consequence.

Of course, the essay, historically, is closely related to such *critical* activity. Indeed, the essay arose precisely as "commentary ... yielded to criticism" (Foucault 50), at the time, that is, when the medieval procedure of merely compiling information gave way to a skepticism, a questioning of authorities. Whereas, then, the scholarly or critical article has, as a modern form, been marked by a stance of noncritique (to apply Robert Scholes's term from a different though related context, it is "hermetic"), the essay has both implicitly and explicitly commented on matters cultural. Think of the essay from Arnold to Lukács, Adorno to Joseph Epstein. For all their differences in political perspective and cultural assumptions and aspirations, such essayists—and you could add here Kenneth Burke, Derrida, and Guy Davenport, among others—look not merely at a text but through it to contexts that the work engages and to the large social, political, and cultural issues on which it impinges and that impinge on it. Evaluation, judgment, and critique thus return, by no means limited to a balancing of aesthetic values or to a ranking of texts but extending, in the way theorists like Scholes and Edward Said wish, to a questioning and indeed a *criticism* of a text's own perspectives, assumptions, values, and implications. A return to the critical essay today, while involving a resumption of a more personal kind of commentary than has recently been privileged, need not, in other words, portend either a new aestheticism or yet more isolationism. On the contrary, the essay provides the form, as well as the history and so the encouragement, for the practice of a criticism culturally engaged as well as socially and politically responsible. It is as hard to refrain from cultural critique as from personal expression when one writes an essay; indeed, they are what the essay is all about.

Freedom is crucial to the essay, as Adorno remarks, and perhaps a certain negativity as well. For the essay, historically and generically, has opposed not just systems and systematizing but all forms of packaged thinking. It is speculative, thoughtful, whether the thinking concerns matters ordinary and quotidian (as in E. B. White and Samuel Pickering) or intellectual and philosophical (as in Adorno and R. P. Blackmur). In its resistance to forms of totalitarianism, its respect for diversity, heterogeneity, and impurity, the essay can represent a significant critique of what Adorno calls administrative thinking. It also (thereby?) often an implicit critique of professionalism.

If my experience is any indication, graduate students and faculty members alike, many

of them, are eager for some such "revolution" as a return of/to the essay. This loaded term *revolution* is not mine but one that keeps coming up when, in classes and at conferences, I talk about the essay and the kind of criticism that it encourages. I seldom have such warm responses as when I venture, in conference presentations, to mix the personal and the theoretical, attempting the essayistic, more precisely the *familiar (essay) estranged*. Similarly, students in my bibliography and methods course and my seminars in criticism jump at the chance I now routinely provide to write essays as their final "papers." I have even done an essay on, as well as taught, *essayistic teaching*; my own teaching, in fact, now tends to be essayistic. The essay is, it seems to me, nonphallogocentric—and so is the kind of writing best suited to an open, humane teaching such as that sought by feminists, psychoanalytic critics, and educationists like Paulo Freire.

My aim in my classes, as here, is not to replace the article with the essay. Pace William Gass, as I've indicated, the article is valuable; it provides opportunities simply unavailable to the essay. But the latter also represents opportunities and encouragement too long denied us or repressed because they are largely unappreciated by the profession. I am not monistically arguing for only one kind of critical writing, but I *am* arguing that to slight the essay is damaging: such disdain not only risks, if it doesn't actually encourage, a monolithic approach to critical writing but also reduces the possibility for both cultural critique and personal criticism, as well as promoting writing that emphasizes a certain kind of clarity at the expense of grace and art; and thus the essay's disparagers are too willing to forgo the chance of reaching general, nonacademic readers. I would, then, like to restore the essay to a place of prominence. For that reinstatement to occur, I maintain, the essay cannot exist in ignorance or avoidance of theory and its demands; nor can the essay isolate itself from social, political, and cultural investments and so from those concerns and expressions that touch "ordinary" people in their everyday lives. I look toward an essay theoretically informed and artful. Is that too much to hope for, too much to expect?

Let me, in conclusion, briefly describe the kind of critical essay I encourage. (I should emphasize that what follows represents only one of several possible and desirable orientations.³) Reestablishing contact with the Anglo-American tradition of the personal or familiar essay, without sacrificing, intellectual rigor or forgoing the insights and accomplishments of recent theory (this is the hope, anyway, as well as the aim), such an essay would foreground the experience of reading, relating it to the writer's experience. Such a criticism could be considered a kind of travel writing: no longer enslaved to explication but moving back and forth between textual considerations and familiar experience, it would feature the spectacle of the critic's mind (and heart) struggling with texts and, by means of them, with itself (themselves), charting "the course of interpretive discovery" (Fry 200), and at the same time narrating a journey toward some understanding of a textual, personal, cultural, or political problem. As in other forms of literature, so in criticism, where neither commentator nor text commented on should be subordinated to the other, *character* matters. And so the critical character moves on (or

returns to the) stage: not just in the tone of the speaking voice, the quality or capaciousness of mind, the depth of engagement, the extent of human-heartedness—important as they are—but also in what happens to the critic *in* the drama that constitutes imaginative critical reading and writing. Bringing theory to life and life to theory, this new criticism, unthinkable apart from the essay, might thus depict the relation of books and reading to the making of a soul, as well as record “the adventures of the soul among masterpieces” (Anatole France). It might, productively, be the attempt to find a voice.

The full potential of the mutually supportive relation between criticism and the essay we can at present only glimpse, perhaps barely imagine. One result of the union could be better, more vigorous, more interesting critical writing, commentary at once richer and more culturally responsible—a result devoutly to be wished. Whether this close relation would also help to bridge the gap between academic criticism and a general reading public, God only knows. But why bind the imagination, confine our efforts, or continue to repress our desire?

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Notes

¹ Evidence is already to hand of this interest, including a conference on the essay at Seton Hall University in 1987; the publication of selected essays from that conference, by the University of Georgia Press (Butrym); the Sewanee Review's recent celebration of the essay; the appearance of two books on the essay, one written by Graham Good, the other edited by Chris Anderson; a highly successful MLA-CEA session in 1988; the proliferation of university courses on the essay and nonfiction writing.

² In a later essay, “Fighting Words: Unlearning to Write the Critical Essay,” Tompkins reveals an unfortunate failure to distinguish. What she evidently means in this important account is that the *article*, not the essay, must be unlearned, for that academic form encourages an aggressiveness related to the violence of the western novel and film.

³ Elsewhere I go into considerably more detail concerning the *familiar (essay) estranged*, focusing on the relation of critical writing and “the burden of history,” which includes knowledge of the history of the essay (*Estranging*).

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