

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE ESSAY?

An e-mail interview with Julia Keller, Cultural Affairs Reporter of the Chicago Tribune.

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From: Keller, Julia I. [<mailto:JiKeller@tribune.com>]

Sent: Monday, August 06, 2001 2:35 PM

To: 'W. J. T. Mitchell'

Subject: RE: Profound thoughts on essays

Dear Tom:

Here are some of the questions and issues I'd like to explore. Feel free to respond individually to the questions, or simply to use them as a leaping-off point for any remarks you may care to make about the essay in its current state:

1. The personal essay today is a popular format, what with bestselling collections by the likes of David Sedaris and Garrison Keillor and the continuing vogue for Camille Paglia. But are these "essays" in the classic sense of the term, in which personal experience is used as a way to muse about art or politics or some other important realm? I am thinking of essayists such as Hazlitt, Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot or, in our own time, Cynthia Ozick or Lewis Lapham. How would you characterize the current state of the personal essay, both in the world and in the academy?

WJTM: The commonplace thing people say about this is that the "academic article" killed off the essay--whether the familiar, personal, informal, or even (my genre) the critical-theoretical-speculative essay. The academic article is supposed to have killed the essay because it was imitating the form of the scientific treatise, was weighted down with footnotes, long quotations, belabored points, heavy-handed arguments, and a boring, impersonal style. There may be some truth to this. Certainly the "scholarly article" as a genre has a kind of deadness when it is too long for its quotient of information, or is dressing up a cliché with obscure jargon. We used to write parodies of this sort of thing in college: "One could not and should not attempt to repossess those intellectual comfortables and furnishings of the late middle ages, themselves an early efflorescence of the Renaissance." (I memorized this from the intro to a standard textbook on Chaucer).

I think it is not that essay disappeared, but this new kind of (scholarly, professional, academic) writing appeared, and it appeared to be part of a new literary institution--the academic teaching of writing and of literature. In short, English departments killed the essay, because most English professors didn't know how to write essays. But why should they? They weren't trained to write essays; they were trained to read them, to research the historical, philological, intellectual contexts of essays. This was a worthy thing to learn, but it did not involve an expectation that English professors ought to write like Hazlitt or Addison or Carlyle or Emerson or T.S. Eliot or Nietzsche or Northrop Frye (just to get my canon out in the open). English professors wrote as if they were historians, or analysts, or scientists, or German professors.

(Probably journalism helped to "kill" the essay, too, but I'll let you tell that story...)

Anyway, I think gifted essayists, like poets, novelists, playwrights, and screenwriters, are rare birds. The problem is, we don't have a word for it--"creative prose" is awful, non-fiction prose is clunky, and so we just have this thing called the essay. It is a mixed genre, poetic, rhetorical, personal, and argumentative. I think of the essay in its literal sense, as a "trial," a venturing forth of an idea, image, notion, or concept, on that is made concrete with some example, but which aspires to a kind of universality or wider reach beyond the particular. Good essays are speculative & ambitious, but grounded in some particular observation: consider the opening of Hazlitt's "The Spirit of the Age": "We live in an age of talkers, not doers; and the reason is, the world is growing old." One would have to be very dull, indeed, not to be intrigued, puzzled, and drawn in by this opening. Where is he going? Who are the talkers? What sort of doings or actions are being neglected? And what does it mean that the world is growing old? What world? As measured by what clock?

Essayists are still around, and some of them are academics. Northrop Frye, the greatest of the modern Canadian critics, was my early model as a stylist. Frye insisted on the academic status of his prose: he wanted to establish a systematic criticism of literature, including a taxonomy of genres, modes, and forms, and typology of symbolism based in myth and ritual (the seasonal cycle mapped onto comedy, tragedy, romance, and satire). Yet he leavened his search for a progressive science of literature, a research discipline, with a style of presentation that was, in every sense, essayistic. He occasionally lapsed into personal anecdote. He had a way of bringing things home in the plainest possible language (see especially his "stock market" of literary prestige in the intro to *Anatomy of Criticism*). Above all, he was witty and provocative: "Literature, like mathematics, is a language, and a language in itself represents no truth, though it may provide the means for expressing any number of them."(354)

Others I would mention: Edward Said, Phil Fisher, Stanley Fish (sometimes), Sandra Gilbert (see her essay on widowhood in our current issue), Susan Sontag, and even winners of the Bad Writing award such as Homi Bhabha and Fred Jameson. I'll even agree that they are Bad Writers--but they are so in the sense of aggressively bad writers like Ruskin or Carlyle or Coleridge--"rebarbative prose" is, I think, the usual expression. Lots of foreign words we don't like. Hard, knotty syntax that makes you slow down and think. And sometimes, things that don't make any sense. I think the essay has room for this kind of prose. Sometimes it is done well. There isn't just one standard of classic clarity, or one formula. Heidegger and Adorno were great writers of short prose.

So when people gas on about the death of the essay, I always ask if they mean the English essay (and they usually do). The Anglo-American canon gets trotted out. I find this very provincial. One reason why contemporary academic articles are hard is that they are often translated out of (or imitating) other languages. That in itself isn't bad. It's just the way things are. And it makes it hard for Anglo-American writers to settle on the genius of their language. We live in a time like Shakespeare's, when new lingos, jargons, and gabbles are springing up on every side (just think of the language of computing). English is bursting at the seams. Classic well-formed essays are out of the question. Our prose has to feel, if not be, multi-medial.

2. You mentioned that you consider yourself an "eesayist." Tell me why you like the term, why it suits your work.

WJTM: Yes, I try to write essays. I think of it as compensatory move. I'm too lazy and incompetent to write scholarly articles. They involve doing lots of research in the archives where formidable librarians look at you suspiciously. So I like to gather my books around me in my study, occasionally dragging in crate-loads on specific topics (like dinosaurs, photography, cinema, painting, psychoanalysis, ethnography, religion, and the history of science). I like to ponder a question: "What is an image?" "What is the difference between pictures and words?" or contemplate a mystery or just an interesting fact: how do we "see disability"? What could gesture language (the language of the Deaf) say that speech cannot? Why do images seem to have "lives of their own"? How do racial stereotypes work?

In addition to my laziness about research, especially the kind of research that aims at complete mastery of a topic, I write essays because I enjoy them more than articles. I think of writing as an extension of thinking. You don't know what you think until you write it down, and so writing is a process of discovery. The best essays convey that feeling of surprise, elation--or its obverse, the feeling that one has gone too far, that the point has become absurdly over-clever, and must now be undercut.

As a scholar and professional, I aim to do interdisciplinary research (this is my serious answer for grant applications) that requires an understanding of literature, visual art, and media in the context of the critical theories and historical contexts that help to explain them. The essay is ideally suited for this highly general, speculative, and interdisciplinary realm of writing, which merges philosophy and criticism with the more informal, tentative mode.

3. It seems to me that many of the popular essays of today owe more to television and standup comedy than to the literary tradition of the essay. Or am I just a curmudgeon?

WJTM: You are just a curmudgeon. That doesn't mean you are wrong. But I don't think this is the whole story.

4. How does the mission of Critical Inquiry fit into the idea of essays as critical tools?

WJTM: Critical Inquiry has always (over the last 27 years) aimed at the mythic "general reader", which isn't to say that it has always hit the target. Sometimes the target itself moved. We thought the general reader should be a professional person who retains an interest in literature, the arts, and culture. In fact, we aimed lower than the "general" to what we might think of as the lieutenants--the scholars whose work appeals to scholars in other disciplines--e.g., Panofsky or Gombrich, art historians whose work is read by psychologists, literary scholars, media historians, etc.; or writers like Derrida, who is read by everybody and understood by very few, while being compulsively misquoted, misrepresented, and maligned by journalists.

Anyway, we do a lot of editorial work at CI, trying to turn articles into essays, or at least make them into the best prose they can be. The result is, we tend to get submissions from the leading scholars in the academic professions, because they are the ones, generally, who write the most compelling, provocative prose, and they want to reach the

widest possible audience. This is still pretty small. We think several thousand people read the magazine--most of them in literature, the arts, cultural studies, philosophy, history. I don't delude myself that the General Reader is actually reading us. But I do think what the General Reader will be reading about in a few years is what is appearing in our pages now. I guess this makes us an Academic Avant Garde journal, except that we have never tried to portray ourselves as Avant Garde (that is October's function), nor have we tried to be radical or left. We have played the role of the Radical Center (to echo Carel Capek, the great Czech essayist of the 20s and 30s), and I have like to think of us as an "independent" journal in Hazlitt's sense of the word. That is, committed to free, unfettered inquiry and critique; open to experimentation and speculation, but determined to look for the truth and to apply the highest standards of intellectual, disciplinary rigor to our submissions. (These last phrases make me laugh, because these "rigors" actually tend toward rigor mortis, and the criteria of scholarly respectability, the notion of the "acceptable" or "publishable" article, is what I regard as anathema for Critical Inquiry. We want to publish pieces that will provoke love and hate, inform you about something you didn't know, or make you think a thought you might have been avoiding.

In short, we just want to be the sexiest, hippest academic journal in the world--the Harley Davidson of criticism--"Theory Driven."

Sorry. I didnt' mean to write so much. You must have touched a nerve with those questions. Do whatever you want with the answers.