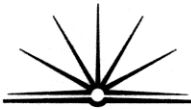


Michel de Montaigne talks of essays as a means of exploration into and around some subject matter that has attracted the curiosity of man in a social or introspective sense. The human pursuit for knowledge, the natural desire to grasp a notion or concept, is that pursuit which is so perfectly accommodated by the essay as a genre because it is refreshingly free of rigid conventions to which a composer is bound to adhere. Basic principles of structure and the purpose of convincing may apply, but the essay allows a breadth and creative freedom that renders it an ideal vehicle for the exploratory, a ~~what~~ Montaigne speaks of. As long as curiosity remains an integral human trait and the essay so adaptable to that pursuit, the 'day' of the essay, the time where it would cease to hold a place in our culture, may never come.

Michel de Montaigne is often blessed rather with the affectionate name relative of having been 'the father of the essay.' In the traditional literary written

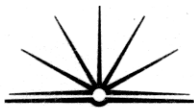


form that he established so ~~many~~ many centuries ago, the essay was employed as a vehicle for exploration into the various nuances and complications of the human condition. That a genre developed so ~~many~~ long ago has maintained a general similarity in our time is testimony to the power of this literary vehicle and its impending longevity. The nature of the essay at its birth, as evidenced by the work of Montaigne in his "The Essays: A selection," was one of careful argumentative flow of a deeply personal nature. Free from conventions of plot and character Montaigne saw the essay as an opportunity to delve into himself, and in that reflection come to an understanding and comprehension of what can broadly be defined as human truths. This is perhaps made no more evident than in his essay on 'Experience,' which within its meandering nature, scope and sheer length, serves as a general definition for the essay of antiquity.



"On Experience" is an introspective, reflective examination of the benefit of experience in regards to various issues that concerned the French people at the time who were the dogs during the soviety period. It wanders from the broad path of its subject matter at many points because of the fact that at its core it is an exploration and it is only after such exploring that Montaigne feels he has reflected adequately to make any general conclusions about experience in relation to the examined themes of health, law, medicine, loyalty etc. This was very much the nature and purpose of his essays: never to conclude before examination; rather to enjoy the journey of discovery and only 'discover' as the journey draws to a close.

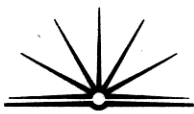
Perhaps one of the reasons that an essay of this nature remains relevant today and supremely appreciated in its state, is the sheer undeniable wisdom that it gives birth to. Through the thorough examination that Montaigne affords the



subject of experience he is able to find boundless truths along his literary journey. It is the acquisition of such truths, the human ability to conclude in such a balanced and aesthetically appealing manner that renders some eras great, and cements its place in history and the future as a significant genre. Take for example the following line of Montaigne, extracted from the opening paragraphs of 'On Experience':

"Experience is a weaker and less dignified means: but truth is so great a matter that we must not disdain any method which leads us to it."

Latent in this excerpt is the truth of a well balanced, nuanced, philosophical proposition. The juxtaposition & relation of truth against experience provides for a stimulating structure of ideas, and as regards the import of the values that Montaigne is expressing. This ability, the intellectual and



creative prowess of the writer to be able to create meaning in such a stylistically beautiful and sound way was particularly relevant to the essay in its earliest form: in its nature as prose. This was because the length of the genre piece at that time demanded sensual stimulation for the reader, whereas today, the notion and predilection to 'get to the point' seems a dominant trait in essays and articles. Perhaps this is the reason that the image-rich freshness and vigor of a sensual essay such as de Montaigne has such an impact today: it, made as best with its philosophical and literary inventiveness.

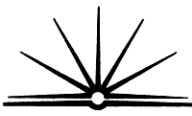
It has been already ^{noted} ~~noted~~ that Montaigne wrote for the reason and purpose of retrospective exploration to arrive at such philosophical and moral conclusions and be used 'on Experience' to advocate this notion of self and individualism as an endless source of inspiration. This is made most overtly manifest where Montaigne

declares to his readers:

"I study no subject more than I study myself. That is my metaphysics. That is my physics."

In this purely explanatory line, not only does Montaigne communicate lucidly the purpose of his prose, but conches his communication once more in balanced rhythm and a structure of sentence that is most beautiful in its sheer simplicity. This is primary to his success as an essayist and demonstrative of the place the essay was set in the context in which he found himself writing. It was the practical matter of not knowing a lot about the outside world that forced introspection; and it is perhaps today our influx of information from that outside world that makes Montaigne's introspective nature so refreshing.

What Montaigne also demonstrates in his essays, is something which is often reflected when one endeavours to make judgement on or assess the genre as a whole. Essays serve two dynamic,



parallel and ^{interesting} ~~entertaining~~ purposes: to convince and enthrall the responder. Montaigne achieves this delicate balance with the greatest of ease, ~~to~~ not only through his broadly entertaining intellectual propositions, but by punctuating his work with the comic aside. Take for example Montaigne's essay "On the Cannibals" a question asked of why ^{the French} we considered the Brazilian cannibals barbarians when the ~~the~~ 'civilised' French themselves were committing acts of far greater barbarity. At the very end of this effective and historically peppered explanation Montaigne adopts the voice of an arrogant French army officer and debilitated satirically depicts of the 'cannibals':

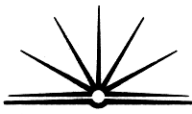
"Ah! but they rear no breeches. . ."

By employing such a voice, Montaigne manages to make comment on the sober lunacy of the French position at the time and rebukes (with relevant in our time) that boot polish spells



sophistication more aptly than harmony with nature. It is exemplary of the essayist's ability to soften the literature to the reader and sharpen the blow for the subject matter. Thus, it can be said that Montaigne, as an example of those employed in similar literary positions in his time, wrote essays of a deeply personal, reflective and exploratory nature, which served his purpose of satiating an inherent curiosity very well.

Modern essayists are far more didactic and tend toward that aforementioned 'to the point' nature so typical of modern Western 'civilization'. But by adapting in such a way to their contexts, these writers have ensured the survival of the essay as an auspicious and adaptable form of effective communication. George Orwell, the famous political essayist is perhaps the most famous example of this band of modern essayist. He writes didactically, vigorously,

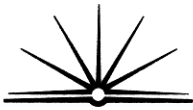


clearly and succinctly and 'to the point'. Unlike 'the father' of his son, Orwell as he states in his essay 'Why I Write',

"start from a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice."

For Orwell, and many of his modern ilk, the exploration of the essay comes after a foregone conclusion. By examining Orwell's essay 'Politics and the English Language' from the book 'The Penguin Essays of George Orwell', we can come to an understanding of the changed nature and range of purposes of the essay genre.

'Politics and the English Language' is a dissertation of the deterioration of language that was becoming characteristic of the time at which Orwell wrote and he uses arguments on language to make serious incisive comment on the nature of political obfuscation. This is a pivotal point at which the line between Orwell's purpose and nature and that of Montaigne deviate widely.



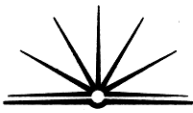
where Montaigne writes with an introspective purpose and indulges in lengthy explorations, Orwell embraces the outside world, particularly that of politics and events in specificity.

Orwell begins strongly, establishing his point in his opening paragraph. This is evidenced in the following excerpt:

"... the English language is in a bad way... Our civilization is decadent, and our language - so the argument runs - must inevitably share in the general collapse."

There is a here strength of conviction even in these opening lines that makes doubtlessly clear the impending arguments that will follow. Orwell sets out to prove a point, Montaigne sets out to arrive at one. This is not to say ~~that~~ however, that Orwell lacks the explorer's luck, as in fact his arguments lead to explorations which arrive at tangential and pivotal points frequently.

However in the same vein, it cannot be denied



that Orwell is representative of the modern writer who maintains a detached dedication to a central issue almost unequivocally declared in the opening paragraphs. This new form of essay is practical in many ways, perhaps none more readily recognized than the clarity with which it conveys the message and values of the text in its entirety. This is evidenced in the following line:

"The whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness."

In this line it is clearly evident that Orwell is perceptive and prescient, and that clarity is central to his success. His characteristic of the modern writer as noted earlier in Orwell is the sheer practicality with which they write. Orwell employs a whole series of examples (introductory, subheadings and offers numerous suggestions to overcome the linguistic ailments of which he speaks in 'Politics'. And yet, amongst all this, Orwell never forgets the need to entertain



there are at least simultaneously working to convince that audience of a certain philosophical and political point. This is made evident in his occasional flourishes of abuse, and for savagely witty comic effect. Take for example the following line from his essay "Notes on Nationalism" where Orwell describes the work of Chesterton as "some of the most jaw-dropping bits of bunkum to be found in our language".

It is the knavery of such a devious art and the surprise with which it confronts the reader that makes Orwell's essays at times relatively stimulating. Orwell achieves wit and breezy entertainment to achieve a political goal in a deviously didactic satire. It is a style symptomatic of a more modern, politically based age.

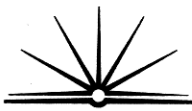
Similarly focused is the work of writer Tim Adams whose work is published in the 'Carabon Observer'. In his essay 'The Way we Write Now'



Adams laments the lack of political inclusion in modern British novels in the context of the BBC filming a version of Trollope's politically focused work 'The Way we live Now'. Adams manages to inspire that Orwellian clarity set out in the article/sayout of the same time reflect the modern essay medium of the newspaper and the washrooms that can shroud a writer with. This modern Orwellian clarity is demonstrated in the following line, where Adams taps specificity into the very crux of his argument:

"If fiction measures its preoccupation then it would seem we have become absorbed by what we feel and disinterested in what we do."

There is inherent in these lines that Orwellian simplicity, but also a hint of the artifice of Montaigne in the balance and parallel sentence structure that has been employed. In an examination of the work of a writer such



as Adams it can be seen that it is by
adopting and adapting those elements of successful
essays that have come before ~~we can conclude~~
the way can live on and expand. This has been
taken further to a level of film and visual essays
evidenced by Ray Muller's documentary
examining the validity of the 'unreliable defence'
'The Wonderful, horrible Life of Leo 'unreliable'
and Betty Churches' ad series 'Betty Churches' Take
5'.

In conclusion one can see that as long as
curiosity remains a human trait, whether it
be aimed at ourselves or our political world,
essays will serve us as a free and adaptable
vehicle which creators can use to explore various
notions and complexities difficult to grapple with
in other forms of prose. The essay has not had
its day, as curiosity too has not had its day, and
perhaps never will. The essay will merely adapt. As
Montaigne said of human curiosity,
"Our eyes in the next world."