Rediscovering the Essay

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The essay is—and, for reasons that the following discussion will advance, should be—the central genre in composition instruction. However, if the essay is to serve as the kind of writing through which students realize their full potential as liberally educated beings, they, and we, need an expanded conception of what the essay is and what it can do.

Traditionally, of course, essays are classed as informal and formal. A set of truisms adequately characterizes the informal essay (by such practitioners as Swift, Lamb, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Twain, Thurber, and White). It is personal and not as highly structured as the formal; it is likely to be anecdotal; and the author has no obligation to assume a disinterested stance toward issues. On the other hand, the formal essay (of, for instance, Addison, Johnson, Arnold, Mill, Newman, Pater, and Emerson) is nonpersonal, highly structured, and goes beyond "conveying information," attempting to convince readers of the validity of a particular vision of experience or reality. However, as Dillon says,

It does not seek to engage the reader in a course of action... but rather in a process of reflection, and its means of convincing are accordingly limited to the use of evidence and logical proof and the posture of openmindedness. These methods are also associated with the liberally educated person, who is meditative, reflective, clear-headed, unbiased, always seeking to understand experience freshly and to find things of interest in the world. (23)

My argument (not really startling or original in this post-structuralist age) is that students should have the right not to be conclusive—as they must be in formal essays—but rather to explore themselves and their worlds in informal essays. Exploratory discourse, as James L. Kinneavy points out, is the result and manifestation of cognitive dissonance, a condition of "wonder, instability, or discomfort" that comes about when observed facts clash with accepted premises or dogmas, precipitating the search for a new model of experience (102-03). For Montaigne, the essay was exploratory; as Zeiger points out, Montaigne "essayed" his ideas, examining them from various points of view, ready to abandon them if the assay (from the same French root as essay) proved they were fool's gold (455).

Students should, like Montaigne, have the right to use their essays to assay.
A New Understanding of Coherence in the Essay

From lyric poetry—not very popular nowadays, I think—we can learn much about attitudes, little about opinions; much about sense impressions, little about ideas. Such also is the case with many particularly satisfying informal "expository" essays that do not provide significant information or advance arguments, but, rather, as Kenneth Burke would say, dance attitudes. The lyric in prose gains its coherence from what Burke calls qualitative progression, in which "the presence of one quality prepares us for the introduction of another" (Counter-Statement 124), not from the syllogistic progression that structures formal essays.

In "Form, Authority, and the Critical Essay," Keith Fort serendipitously and convincingly explains what should have been, but was not, the obvious: available forms determine attitudes. If, for instance, the only form available to students for their responses to literature is the conventional expository essay, with its clear-cut topic and its tree-able structure, then the attitude expressed must affirm the discursiveness of literature. The prose lyric breaks out of the syllogistic, linear Western form and, in so doing, frees itself of the strictures of discursiveness.

The essential difference between the coherence of the formal essay and that of the informal essay can be expressed metaphorically. In its superstructure, the well-formed formal essay is a branching tree diagram or organizational chart with the topic, enthymeme, or macroproposition (Van Dijk 42) at the top. In an image adapted from Kintsch (7-8), the form of an informal essay is that of a galaxy, with dense clusters of bright stars related as subsystems within the whole as it spirals through the universe.

The prevailing dogma is that a clear-cut topic (in the scientistic language of Van Dijk, a "macroproposition") is essential to coherence, but Witte and Faigley give a more useful view of coherence as "those underlying semantic relations that allow a text to be understood and used ... conditions governed by the writer's purpose, the audience's knowledge and expectations, and the information to be conveyed" (202). In effect, any text will be coherent if the reader takes it to be so, and a case in point is The Waste Land, which Cleanth Brooks interprets as a perfectly coherent whole (138-59), and which Graham Hough likens to a painting with "pointillist technique in one part ... and the glazes of the high renaissance in another" (38).

One of Wolfgang Iser's points is that readers must fill "gaps" in the text and, thus, are actively involved in constructing, not merely recovering, meaning. A passage quoted in Clark and Clark demonstrates that readers also construct global representations (that is, coherent wholes) from the individual sentences of a text:

The two of them glanced nervously at each other as they approached the man standing there expectantly. He talked to them for about ten minutes, but spoke loudly enough that everyone else in the room could hear too. Eventually he handed over two objects he had been given, one to each of them. After he had
said a few more words, the ordeal was over. With her veil lifted, the two of them kissed, turned around, and rushed from the room arm in arm, with everyone else falling in behind. (161)

Readers eventually realize that the scene is a wedding, even though no individual sentence in the passage says as much, and the text becomes a coherent whole.

Clark and Clark also quote a story from a study by Bransford and Johnson. One group of readers was given the title "Watching a Peace March from the Fortieth Floor" and another group the title "A Space Trip to an Inhabited Planet." Because of one sentence in the passage—"The landing was gentle and luckily the atmosphere was such that no special suits had to be worn"—the readers of "A Space Trip to an Inhabited Planet" found the passage much more coherent than did the readers with the other title:

The view was breathtaking. From the window one could see the crowd below. Everything looked extremely small from such a distance, but the colorful costumes could still be seen. Everyone seemed to be moving in one direction in an orderly fashion and there seemed to be little children as well as adults. The landing was gentle and luckily the atmosphere was such that no special suits had to be worn. At first there was a great deal of activity. Later, when the speeches started, the crowd quieted down. The man with the television camera took many shots of the setting and the crowd. Everyone was very friendly and seemed glad when the music started. (163)

The point is, of course, that the problematic sentence fits readers' (sci-fi) world knowledge about space travel and conflicts with views from the fortieth floor.

But the best way to demonstrate the expressive and cohesive range of the essay is to examine specimens by contemporary writers. I will begin with a discussion of a formal essay by Stephen Jay Gould; next I will turn to informal essays by Joan Didion, Lewis Thomas, and Loren Eiseley.

A Formal Essay by Stephen Jay Gould

The title is "Natural Selection and the Human Brain: Darwin vs. Wallace," and the first sentence is "In the south transept of Chartres cathedral, the most stunning of all medieval windows depicts the four evangelists as dwarfs sitting upon the shoulders of four Old Testament prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel." Gould then refers to Newton's aphorism: "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." This point leads him to mention a book on pre-Newtonian uses of the metaphor and Gould's explanation that the author, Columbia sociologist of science Robert K. Merton, "devoted much of his work to the study of multiple discoveries in science" (47), which is exactly what happened in the case of Darwin and Wallace.

A reader might ask why Gould would devote nearly a whole page of his essay to a lead-in when he might have begun directly by stating that
Darwin and Wallace almost simultaneously developed theories of natural selection. The answer is obvious: Gould needed to establish his ethical argument by setting a tone and taking a stance.

Despite its dramatistic structure, "Natural Selection" is an example of Burke's syllogistic progression, "the form of a perfectly conducted argument, advancing step by step" (Counter-Statement 124). The body of the essay is an explanation of the dialectic whereby Darwin and Wallace developed nearly identical theories of natural selection and of the way in which the theories diverged. In other words, the essay is essentially an analysis of scientific logic—but in terms of a human drama.

The disagreement between Wallace and Darwin hinges on the doctrine of strict selectionism, to which Wallace clung: all evolutionary developments must have been the result of adaptation for survival of the fittest. Darwin argued, however, that adaptive change in one organ of a creature can lead to nonadaptive change in another organ, and that an organ developed for one function can perform another nonselected function as well. Gould writes, "In 1870, as he prepared The Descent of Man, Darwin wrote to Wallace: 'I grieve to differ from you, and it actually terrifies me and makes me constantly distrust myself. I fear we shall never quite understand each other'" (52).

The crisis came when Wallace attempted to understand the evolution of the human brain. He knew that the brains of savages were as large as those of civilized humans and that "since cultural conditioning can integrate the rudest savage into our most courtly life, the rudeness itself must arise from a failure to use existing capacities, not from their absence" (54). As Wallace said, "Natural selection could only have endowed savage man with a brain a few degrees superior to that of an ape, whereas he actually possesses one very little inferior to that of a philosopher" (55). The human brain must have been created by a Higher Power. Ironically, then, as Gould says, Wallace's hyper-selectionism led directly back to the creationism that it was intended to replace.

Thus, in his essay Gould has cast a technical discussion in the form of a drama, fashioning characters—Alfred Russell Wallace and Charles Darwin—that "humanize" the information. These are quite different from the "composite characters" that Hallowell says are one of the devices of the new journalism. Nonetheless, the informativeness of the essay is its primary interest; the technical brilliance of the author in conveying that information engages only the specialized reader, not the common reader. "Natural Selection" contrasts starkly with the essays discussed below.

An Appositional Essay by Joan Didion

Joan Didion's "Los Angeles Notebook," an attitudinal characterization of Los Angeles, is a series of five sketches in eight pages, adding up to an ideal example of qualitative progression in a prose lyric. Here are the subjects of the sketches:
1) The Santa Ana wind: "The Pacific turned ominously glossy during a Santa Ana period, and one woke in the night troubled not only by the peacocks screaming in the olive trees but by the eerie absence of surf" (217-18).

2) A late-night radio talk show: "So it went, from midnight until 5 a.m., interrupted by records and by occasional calls debating whether or not a rattlesnake can swim. Misinformation about rattlesnakes is a leitmotif of the insomniac imagination in Los Angeles" (221).

3) Wearing a bikini to a supermarket on a hot afternoon: "That is not a very good thing to wear to the market but neither is it, at Ralph's on the corner of Sunset and Fuller, an unusual costume. Nonetheless a large woman in a cotton muumuu jams her cart into mine at the butcher counter. 'What a thing to wear to the market,' she says in a loud but strangled voice" (222).

4) The bored sophistication of movie people: "A party at someone's house in Beverly Hills: a pink tent, two orchestras, a couple of French Communist directors in Cardin evening jackets, chili and hamburgers from Chasen's" (223).

5) Piano bars: "A drunk requests 'the Sweetheart of Sigma Chi.' The piano player doesn't know it. 'Where'd you learn to play the piano?' the drunk asks. 'I got two degrees,' the piano player says. 'One in musical education.'" (224).

Through what Chris Anderson calls her "radical particularity" (4), Didion creates an attitudinally coherent essay. "Her habitual gesture as a stylist is to isolate the ironic or symbolic or evocative image and then reflect on its possible significance" (Anderson 134). "Los Angeles Notebook" is a series of these images in apposition.

In "Brain, Rhetoric, and Style," I characterize the "appositional" essay (135-36) as follows:

1) The topic is implied, not stated directly. (I would now say that the reader may derive or create a topic or macroproposition.)
2) As opposed to the rigid organization of what I called the "propositional" (that is, "discursive") essay, appositional organization is flexible.
3) Examples are specific (as in the "radical particularity" of Didion).
4) As opposed to the backgrounded style of the propositional essay, the appositional style is foregrounded. To use the foregrounded style is "to present phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations" (Auerbach 6).
5) Finally, the appositional essay has great presence.

In fact, these characteristics are a pretty good description of an essay such as "Los Angeles Notebook."

Lewis Thomas and the Sham Enthymeme

If asked to state the thesis of the title essay in Lewis Thomas's collection, Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony, the typical reader, attempting to explain the nearly unsayable lyric experience in discursive terms, would probably say something like this: "The realization that humankind can annihilate itself is depressing." But this is much like boiling "To His Coy Mistress" down to the aphorism carpe diem, and it demeans the experience that the essay provides—as a colleague of mine
once said, you sell your soul for a pot of message.

In this essay, only the unsayable, the lyric, makes sense; the discursive, the expository, is madness.

The very title evokes the swelling lament of the symphony's first movement, but Thomas is preoccupied with the final movement, the adagio—an indeterminate text which once had been "a metaphor for reassurance, confirming my own strong hunch that the dying of every living creature, the most natural of all experiences, has to be a peaceful experience." But now the meaning has changed. From the call of the horns and the inconstancy of the strings fading almost into silence and then surging back, Thomas derives a meaning that he conveys through a panoramic image of worldwide thermonuclear devastation, concluding specifically with the area that he loves more than any other part of earth, the Engadine.

Now, Thomas makes a prosaic statement about his reconciliation to the idea of death, but then modulates from this statement to another image: that luminous blue and white ball, the earth as seen from outer space, "the great round being," seen as an organism with a mind which Thomas would be a small part of after his death.

What has transformed the meaning of the Ninth into "a hideous noise" is the thought of the young, who could, like Thomas, have discovered Wallace Stevens, Brahms, and Beethoven; who, from the records of their forebears, could have derived assurance of the future, but who must now live with the facts of the thermonuclear age. The melody near the end of the Ninth no longer says "We'll be back, we're still here, keep going, keep going" because a freakish intertextuality—the discursive facts of a pamphlet on MX Basing and a television talk on civil defense by a government official—has changed the symphony's conclusion into the unintelligible cacophony of silo hatches opening. Thomas has gone as far as language will carry him, but that isn't far enough. To "say" what needs to be said, young people would need to invent a new kind of music, for the old kind is inadequate, and human language, with its rational statement of the facts, is merely a curse to be exorcised, an unbearable torment.

Unlike Didion's "Los Angeles Notebook," Thomas's "Late Night Thoughts" does have an easily derivable enthymeme or macroproposition, stated earlier (somewhat invidiously, to be sure): "The realization that humankind can annihilate itself is depressing." But, paradoxically, the "real" message is that the real "message" is unsayable, even unthinkable—beyond comprehension and, hence, beyond expression. One might say, then, that Thomas's enthymeme is a sham.

A tree diagram of "Los Angeles Notebook" is one-dimensional:
A tree of "Late Night Thoughts" is a superstructure that could well be that of a discursive essay:

The meaning of the Ninth

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<th>formerly, the peacefulness of death</th>
<th>the lapse into unintelligibility</th>
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<td>continuity return</td>
<td>images of destruction</td>
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<td>loss of meaningfulness</td>
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<td>loss of continuity</td>
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But neither "Los Angeles Notebook" nor "Late Night Thoughts" advances an argument, as does Gould's "Natural Selection"; nor is either informative in the sense of reducing the reader's uncertainty about a topic or of supplying fresh data; nonetheless, both are, in my opinion at least, particularly satisfying and convincing.

Organic Form in Loren Eiseley's Essays

Leafing through the works of Loren Eiseley, one finds, page after page, brilliant metaphors, such as this one from the first page of The Unexpected Universe: "Every man contains within himself a ghost continent—a place circled as warily as Antarctica was circled two hundred years ago by Captain James Cook." Or this one from the first page of The Immense Journey: "Some lands are flat and grass-covered, and smile so evenly up at the sun that they seem forever youthful, untouched by man or time. Some are torn, ravaged and convulsed like the features of profane old age."

Throughout the essays, one also finds anecdotes from which the teller draws lessons. One of the most dramatic, though too long to quote in its entirety, begins "The Angry Winter":

I had been huddled beside the fire one winter night, with the wind prowling outside and shaking the windows. The big shepherd dog on the hearth before me occasionally glanced up affectionately, sighed, and slept. I was working, actually, amidst the debris of a far greater winter. On my desk lay the lance points of ice age hunters and the heavy leg bone of a fossil bison. No remnants of flesh attached to these relics. The deed lay more than ten thousand years remote. It was represented here by naked flint and by bone so mineralized it rang when struck. As I worked on in my little circle of light, I absently laid the bone beside me on the floor. The hour had crept toward midnight. A grating noise, a heavy
rasping of big teeth diverted me. I looked down.

The dog had risen. That rock-hard fragment of vanished beast was in his jaws and he was mouthing it with a fierce intensity I had never seen exhibited by him before.

"Wolf," I exclaimed, and stretched out my hand. The dog backed up but did not yield. A low and steady rumbling began to rise in his chest, something out of a long-gone midnight. There was nothing in that bone to taste, but ancient shapes were moving in his mind and determining his utterance. Only fools gave up bones. He was warning me. (93-94)

There follows an essay, concerning evolution and ecology, among other topics, which ends with another anecdote. When he was a young man, Eiseley set out for a long walk on a "sullen November day," finally, at twilight, reaching the town cemetery. There among the dead, he found life: a jackrabbit.

We both had a fatal power to multiply, the thought flashed on me, and the planet was not large. Why was it so, and what was the message that somehow seemed spoken from a long way off beyond an ice field, out of all possible human hearing?

The snow lifted and swirled about us once more. He was going to need that broken bit of shelter [provided by a slab]. The temperature was falling. For his frightened, trembling body in all the million years between us, there had been no sorcerer's aid. He had survived alone in the blue nights and the howling dark. He was thin and crumpled and small.

Step by step I drew back among the dead and their fallen stones. Somewhere, if I could follow the fence lines, there would be a fire for me. For a moment I could see his ears nervously recording my movements, but I was a wraith now, fading in the storm.

"There are so few tracks in all this snow," someone had once protested. It was true. I stood in the falling flakes and pondered it. Even my own tracks were filling. But out of such desolation had arisen man, the desolate. In essence, he is a belated phantom of the angry winter. He carried, and perhaps will always carry, its cruelty and its springtime in his heart. (119)

It would appear that Eiseley the essayist is a practicing Romantic, following the leads of his anecdotes and metaphors, not aiming them—as does Gould, for instance—toward a clear-cut semantic intention.

As a long-time admirer of Eiseley's work, one who has with great pleasure been reading and rereading the essays for twenty years, I can say without intending criticism that the essays are structurally alogical, but not quite, either, examples of qualitative progression. They gain their structure through the "perspective by incongruity" that results when Eiseley follows the implications of his "representative anecdotes" (Burke, Grammar 59-61).

We need to ponder Burke's "perspective by incongruity." It is, he says, "a method for gauging situations by verbal 'atom cracking.' That is, a word belongs by custom to a certain category—and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category" (Attitudes 308). Then, of course, you follow the particles set free in the "cracking." The result is a "dramatic vocabulary, with weighting and counter-
weighting, in contrast with the liberal ideal of neutral naming in the characterization of processes" (Attitudes 311).

Structurally, another of Eiseley's essays, "The Hidden Teacher," is a series of anecdotes:

1) A retelling of the Job story: "A youth standing by, one Elihu, also played a role in this drama, for he ventured diffidently to his protesting elder that it was not true that God failed to manifest Himself. He may speak in one way or another, though men do not perceive it" (48-49).

2) An anecdote of a spider (discussed below).

3) An anecdote of a seed: "Its flexible limbs were stiffer than milkweed down, and, propelled by the wind, it ran rapidly and evasively over the pavement. It was like a gnome scampering somewhere with a hidden packet—for all I could tell, a totally new one: one of the jumbled alphabets of life" (56-57).

4) An anecdote of a mathematical genius: "Like some heavy-browed child at the wood's edge, clutching the last stone hand ax, I was witnessing the birth of a new type of humanity—one so beyond its teachers that it was being used for mean purposes while the intangible web of the universe in all its shimmering mathematical perfection glistened untaught in the mind of a chance little boy" (58).

5) An anecdote of an archaeologist at Palenque: "After shining his torch over hieroglyphs and sculptured figures, the explorer remarked wonderingly: 'We were the first people for more than a thousand years to look at it'" (60).

6) An anecdote of a young linguistics student who ultimately became Eiseley's revered professor: "The young student published a paper upon Mohegan linguistics, the first of a long series of studies upon the forgotten languages and ethnology of the Indians of the Northeastern forest. He had changed his vocation and turned to anthropology because of the attraction of a hidden teacher. But just who was the teacher? The young man himself, his instructor, or that solitary speaker of a dying tongue who had so yearned to hear her people's voice that she had softly babbled it to a child?" (62-63).

7) An anecdote of a dream, in which a writer sees his dead father and mother through a window and then realizes that he is looking only at his own reflection: "My line was dying, but I understood. I hope they understood, too" (66).

The anecdote of the spider is a synecdoche for the structure of Eiseley's essay:

I once received an unexpected lesson from a spider.

It happened far away on a rainy morning in the West. I had come up a long gulch looking for fossils, and there, just at eye level, lurked a huge yellow-and-black orb spider, whose web was moored to the tall spears of buffalo grass at the edge of the arroyo. It was her universe, and her senses did not extend beyond the lines and spokes of the great wheel she inhabited. Her extended claws could feel every vibration throughout that delicate structure. She knew the tug of wind, the fall of a raindrop, the flutter of a trapped moth's wing. Down one spoke of the web ran a stout ribbon of gossamer on which she could hurl out to investigate her prey.

Curious, I took a pencil from my pocket and touched a strand of the web. Immediately there was a response. The web, plucked by its menacing occupant, began to vibrate until it was a blur. Anything that had brushed claw or wing against that amazing snare would be thoroughly entrapped. As the vibrations slowed, I could see the owner fingerling her guidelines for signs of struggle. A
pencil point was an intrusion into this universe for which no precedent existed. Spider was circumscribed by spider ideas; its universe was spider universe. All outside was irrational, extraneous, at best, raw material for spider. As I proceeded my way along the gully, like a vast impossible shadow, I realized that in the world of spider I did not exist. (49-50)

Stripped of its context, the lesson that Eiseley learned from the spider is nugatory: the realization that "among the many universes in which the world of living creatures existed, some were large, some small, but all, including man's, were in some way limited or finite" (51); however, the anecdote validates the lesson, just as a fable validates the moral or a lyric poem validates whatever enthymeme can be derived from it.

In any case, Eiseley tells us that many times he has pondered his encounter with the orb spider and that "a message has arisen only now from the misty shreds of that webbed universe" (51). The message, though, turns out to be a question that leads to a non sequitur:

Was it that spidery indifference to the human triumph?
If so, that triumph was very real and could not be denied. (51)

Paraphrased, these sentences say, "If the message was that spidery indifference to the human triumph, that triumph was very real and could not be denied," and this simply does not compute. However, the lapse in syllogistic progression hardly matters, for the reader is following the implications of the anecdotes, which are heuristic.

What is the triumph? One cannot, as a matter of fact, be certain. It is either the emergence of the human species or the scientific achievement of tracing that emergence:

I saw, had seen many times, both mentally and in the seams of exposed strata, the long backward stretch of time whose recovery is one of the great feats of modern science. I saw the drifting cells of the early seas from which all life, including our own, has arisen. The salt of those ancient seas is in our blood, its lime is in our bones. Every time we walk along a beach some ancient urge disturbs us so that we find ourselves shedding shoes and garments, or scavenging among seaweed and whitened timbers like the homesick refugees of a long war. (51)

The "refugees of war" metaphor opens a new pathway for Eiseley to follow: "And war it has been indeed—the long war of life against its inhospitable environment, a war that has lasted for perhaps three billion years" (51)—from the first seething of chemicals in a world without oxygen through the age of the ferns to the human brain, "so frail, so perishable, so full of inexhaustible dreams and hungers" (52).

To fault Didion, Thomas, and Eiseley because they follow leads other than the logical is to miss the whole point of these prose lyrics, which advance by what might be called anecdotal progression. To disregard these kinds of essays in the classroom is to delimit the range of discourse
available to students and, thus, to delimit their capacity for thought and expression.

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Works Cited


**JAC Needs Your Input**

Although we had planned to return to semiannual publication with next year's issue (volume 9), several readers have urged us to continue publishing the journal annually, saying they prefer a single substantial volume to two smaller issues. Thus, we will publish volume 9 as a double issue. For subsequent volumes, we're interested in hearing which format best serves your needs. Please write or call and let us know your preference.