Essay to Myself: Part II; All about the Personal Essayist

By Don Gray

graydj99@gmail.com

2019 Silver Arts Program

Category: Literary Arts

Sub-Category: Essay

Some literary genres are defined by their form (the way a piece of literature is presented, like an essay which has an introduction, body and conclusion); some by their content /subject matter (essays can be about anything); and some by their style (the way the writer presents their thoughts). Jay Stevenson, PhD, author of '*Idiot's Guide to English Literature*' wrote that 'it takes all kinds of literary genres and thus hard to pin down'. In literature, the essay comprises many aspects such as a point of view, tone, voice, syntax (word and sentence placement), and method of narration. Like the essay, the essayist comprises may aspects which I will attempt to define / point out in this essay.

Ben Johnson, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, coined the phrase essayist in 1609. Robert Jameson, '*Essays Old and New*', claimed that the most prominent essayists include: Michel De Montaigne (1533-1592) who is the so-called father of the modern essay; Francis Bacon (1561-1626) considered being the father the English essay; Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was the father of the American Essay (my favorite essayist… love his style).

What do other essayists say about being one and what makes them an essayist? What makes them tick, so to speak? A perfect place to start is with Elwyn Brooks White, essayist (1899-1985), believably, the best of the twentieth century essayists. He 'revels in the essayist's freedom to adapt a variety of personas, including philosopher, jester, humorist, raconteur (tells anecdotes in a skillful and amusing way-a storyteller), pundit (knowledgeable in a certain subject), devil's advocate ("my personal favorite"), and enthusiasts.'

Andrew Belleau (1930-1986), essayists / author of '*Little Essayistic*' defines the essayist as 'an artist of the narratively (narrative storytelling) of ideas'. Phillip Lopate, essayist/editor, '*Essayist on the Essay*', states that the 'personal essayist is not necessarily out to win the audience's unqualified love, but to present the complex portrait of a human being,' (2012: page xxix…). Vivian Gornick (1935-present), essayist, '*Essayist on the Essay*', relates that 'the personal essayist can not hide their persona'. They are the narrator (1st person) of the story. They become a presence, 'it's (Essay's) tone of voice, it's angle of vision, rhythm of its sentence. The novelist can hide behind the character narrating the story while the essayist lays it all on the line. Their thoughts, inconsistencies, hang ups, shine through this clear concise writing.'

The above references / quotes paint a reflective picture of the essayists of the past and present as being free thinking, carefree individualist; ones motivated to tell it like it is while person enough to lay their personality on the line. One might call it the persona, personality, temperament, psyche, of the essayist; but it will be presented in full color in one's essays. So, realize that your personality is projected through your essay…a defining feature of the essay.

Other essayists have given hints/cautions about what and how an essayist can portray their persona in the personal essay. Virginia Woolf, English essayist/writer, '*The Modern Essay*', claims that personality is the essayist's most proper; yet, most dangerous tool.' She (Virginia Woolf) also wrote that 'in the modern essay, the voice of scorn should never be heard in this narrow plot'. William Gass, essayist, '*Emerson and the Essay*', wrote 'the essay should never be pushy. If there is too much earnestness, too great a need to persuade, a want to correct

convictions in the reader is implied, and therefore an absence of community'. Per Arthur Benson, '*The Act of the Essayist*', 'the author's power is the giving of a good natured-humorous, gracious and reasonable personality.' However, Elizabeth Hardwick, '*In the Age of the Essay*', cautions that 'pompously self-righteousness, lamely (insincere, obnoxiously) jocular forays offend because of an air of immature certainty surrounding them'. Note: "I am sometimes guilty of this last point." Finally, Phillip Lopate, "*The Art of the Personal Essay*' warns that 'the enemy of the personal essay is self-righteousness. As a personal essayist, it's okay to sea-saw between modesty and touchy egoism; quality of being true to self, eccentricity in their conversational address to the reader unlike the novelist, the poet, and playwright.'

Additionally, Maureen Griffin, author of '*Spinning Words into Gold*', defines a writer as one who asks the right questions. 'The books I love the most are those in which the author was writing not to pontificate or enlighten, but to explore, ponder, delve, probe, investigate, ask… in a word, question.' Paul Graham, essayist, '*Essayist on the Essay*', writes that 'an essay is something you write to figure something out. Questions answered is not enough.' However, the editor of Essayist on the Essay', Carl Klaus, states … 'it is whether the answers were interesting.' 'A personal / informal essay prompts a conversation, meanders like a river, and at best takes us in an unexpected direction. What you tell the reader doesn't matter, so long as it is interesting.'

Alexander Smith, '*On Writing of Essays*', writes about the need for truthfulness and modesty in this non-fiction genre called the essay. He writes that 'a modest, truthful person speaks better

about themselves than anything else, and on their subject their speech is likely to be most profitable to their hearers. Certainly, there is no subject with which they are better acquainted, and on which they have a better title to be heard. And it is this egotism, this perpetual reference to self (1st person) in which the charm of the Essayist resides. If a person is worth knowing at all, he is worth knowing well. The Essayist gives you their thoughts, and lets you know, also, how they came by them. He/she has nothing to conceal; they throw open the door and windows, and lets them enter who will.' Quote: *'Always act upon the dictates of your conscience. When one's words are in accord with one's thoughts, they then become truth and find expression in the written word.*' Divine Discourse by Sathya Sai Baba

The essayists, unlike the novelists and the short story writers per Phillip Lopate, '*The Art of the Personal Essay*', emphasize that the essayist should tell a good story. They will violate the rule that is paramount for a short story author; 'they will tell versus show what is in their thoughts.' The art of elaboration is used by the short story fiction writer, however, 'a true essayist has the ability to draw out a point through example, lists, simile, metaphor, small variation, quotes, aphorisms (as used by Bacon… concise statement of truth, maxim, adage, etc.), hyperbolic exaggeration (for effect), whatever…' My take on this is the personal essay sometimes include a walk in the forest while seeing / observing a variety of trees, plants, flowers, animals, pathways, etc. This variety of observable items represent scraps of poetry, quotations, aphorisms, to assist with the art of elaboration. They enhance one's story telling ability.

Professor Lopate writes that ‘an essayist merely surrounds a subject, a mood, a problematic irritation-from all angles.’ ‘The personal essay is a wonderfully tolerant form, able to accommodate rumination (deep thoughts about something), memoir, anecdote, diatribe, scholarship, fantasy, and philosophy.’

Patricia Vestal, screenwriter, ‘*the Elements of Storytelling*’, says that ‘the writer’s style includes many different literary devices and stylistic techniques, such as syntax (words, sentences placed properly together), semantics, diction, tone, pacing, and even punctuation.’ These issues will be addressed in Part III. Note: the essay (non-fiction) isn’t concerned about dialogue and character development which are devices left to the fiction writers.

What makes up an essayist? Do they need special qualifications / background / abilities? These are questions for myself, since I am writing this essay to myself. From the reading and research so far, I would say an essayist has to be resourceful, analytical, and observant recorders of life. Like fine wine, most of the successful essayists become aged with the right combination of experience and background. As George Lukas, ‘*On Nature and Form of Essay*’, ‘use your leisure to contemplate the business of nature and the poetic transience of life.’ Per Professor Lopate, ‘always bring the aroma of age by editing the past experiences. Let the topical be the adorned by the journalist.’

John Gross, editor of ‘*The Oxford Book of Essays*’, mentions that ‘essayists need a range of interests with a keenness of observation.’ Peter Quennell, the editor for ‘*The selected essays of*

Cyril Connolly', wrote 'the essayist should have an inquisitive spirit, but, an invaluable gift, "the seeing eye," accompanied by a feeling for proper use of language that enables a writer to pin down impressions in a few revelatory words.' Regarding the gift of the seeing eye, Sir Artur Conan's Sherlock Holmes character said it best, 'it is the ability to observe rather than merely to see.' Taken / paraphrased from Margareta Fox's book, '*Conan Doyle for the Defense*'.

How important is the all-seeing eye? As important as the ability to listen… to "really" listen. An all-hearing Ear is required. Take time to listen to everyone… be an interested listener, whether passive or active, it must be a concentrated effort though. Listen to what? Whatever, relates to their life and experience…their thoughts, desires, and dreams will interest others. It makes your writing (taken from comments and confessions) more personal and intimate. It's what a reader wants. If one doesn't have the all-seeing eye or the quick ear, then 'cultivate or acquire the facility of being mentally alert.' "Be like James Bond." 'Be susceptible to impressions, (both heard and observed), and see how greatly such an attitude adds to the pleasure of living; how much you are able to discover about yourself. Allow yourself to grow mentally through practice in the expression of your ultimate thoughts', (William M. Tanner, Editor & Notes, '*Essays and Essay-Writing*').

Comedy writers exemplify the above statements / quotes. They would be great essayists / humorists. Take, for instance, Jeannie and Jim Gaffigan. Their monologues are created because they have this inquisitive spirit and the all-seeing eyes that catch / observe everything from everyday life; food, eating habits, places, people they encounter, and ordinary things… "stuff, for

a more technical term / viewpoint". They can take a baby's 1st birthday party and create a humorous essay. Anything / subject is fair game to them to include, McDonald's fries, gym usage, Jesus, birthing at home, etc. Their book, 'Food: A Love Affair', classified as autobiographical; however, exemplifies a book of personal essays.

The Gaffigans hear a hum, an interior noise… to relieve this noise, like true essayists, they acknowledge it, observe it, record it, and inspired to put it into play so others can hear / read it. Their motivation is to entertain with humor which provide a needed service to humanity. Per Walter Benjamin, author of '*Unpacking my Library*' claims that 'every essay is inspired by an event, emotion, a bit of landscape, a work of plastic art… and words of others which most often bring the essay into being'.

Essayists write about what they know, research, observe, hear and what interests them. They have the 'quick ear, an ability to discern the infinite suggestions of common things, a brooding meditative spirit, are all that an essayist requires to start business with', (Alexander Smith, '*On Writing Essays*').

Finally, An Essayist is usually an introspective person, one with experience in living who correlates information and knowledge with observation and listening skills, then bundles all into a written essay that includes subject matter intertwined with their own opinion / thoughts drawn from within. Imported into this material is a personality, voice, tone with the final objective to inform, educate, entertain, and / or for artful self-expression.

Who is not an essayist? Michael Hamburger, wrote an essay on '*Essay on the Essay*' where he implies that an essayist is interested in the walk and also the view. One who collects those views and uses them. However, one who drove to the view, sat inside the car and merely say they were there…is not an essayist.

Quote, per R.W. Emerson, '*Essay II Self Reliance*', wrote 'there is a time in every person's education they arrive at the conviction… they must take themselves for better, for worse and realize that no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him/her but through ones toil bestowed upon that plat of ground which is given him/her to till'. Or per my great grand pappy, a Kentucky/Indiana truck farmer with 10 kids… "success is… to quit leaning on the hoe handle and start hoeing."

Know that 'the hero of the essay is its author in the act of thinking things out; feeling and finding a way in the work of the imagination,' (William Goss, '*Emerson and the Essay*').