

# On Essaying

James Moffett



Having read Pseudodoxia Epidemica, student ponders pre-writing control over variables in recently assigned spontaneous, expressive, non-scientific, developmentally based task-- and glad of it.

From C. von Burr-Rider, The A-B-C's of Cognitive Science (Misthaufen Paperbacks, Whole Child Foundation, JHS, SJ 13)

While doing summer institutes on writing I have frequently encountered teachers who will call every kind of writing that is not book-report, term-paper, essay-question stuff "personal" or "creative" writing (the two terms being interchangeable) and hence put it in a big bag that goes up on the shelf. Priority goes of course to "exposition," which is equated with "essay," which is equated in turn with forced writing on given topics from books, lectures, or "current issues." In these institutes with teachers I break a class into trios in which members help each other, over several weeks, to develop subjects and techniques by hearing or reading partners' writing ideas at various stages of working up the material. Some of this material is gleaned from memory, some is information obtained fresh by interviewing or observing, and some is feeling, thought, or imagination elicited suddenly by a stimulus such as a tune or other in-class presentation. The material may take the form of stories, dialogs, essays, or songs and poems. It soon becomes obvious that ideas stem from all kinds of material and take all kinds of forms and that the very limited sort of exposition used for testing enjoys no monopoly on intellectual activity; participants can see, often with astonishment, how loaded with ideas is this rich variety of writing they have produced.

When schools narrow the notion of essay to fit it to editing, they are violating the whole tradition of the genre from its very inception to the present. College composition instructors and anthologists of essays have doted for years on George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," which they hold up to students as a model of essay or "expository writing." Please look closely at it even if you think you know it well; if a student wrote it, it would be called "personal writing," that is, soft and non-intellectual. Orwell narrated in first person how as a British civil servant in Burma he was intimidated by villagers into shooting an elephant against his will. But so effectively does he say **what happens** by telling **what happened** that the force of his theme--the individual's moral choice whether or not to conform to the group--leaves us with the impression that the memoir is "expository,"--that is chiefly cast in the present tense of generalization and in

third person. What we really want to help youngsters learn is how to express ideas of universal value in a personal voice. Fables, parables, poems and songs, fiction and memoir may convey ideas as well as or better than editorials and critiques. Orwell does indeed provide a fine model, but teachers should not let prejudice fool them into misunderstanding the actual kind of discourse in which he wrote "Shooting an Elephant" and other excellent essays, for this leads to a confusing double standard whereby we ask students to emulate a great writer but to do it in another form.

### **The Essay: An Attempt**

Orwell wrote deep in a tradition of English letters, honoring the essay as a candid blend of personal and universal. It was resurrected if not invented during the Renaissance by Montaigne, who coined the term essai from essayer, to attempt. From his position of philosophical skepticism ("What do I know?") he saw his writing as personal attempts to discover truth, what he thought and what could be thought, in exactly the same sense that Donald Murray or Janet Emig or I myself might speak of writing as discovery. From Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy and Browne's Urn Burial; Addison's and Steele's Spectator articles; through the essays of Swift, Lamb, Hazlitt, and DeQuincey to those of Orwell, Virginia Woolf, Joan Didion, and Norman Mailer, English literature has maintained a marvelous tradition, fusing personal experience, private vision, and downright eccentricity, with intellectual vigor and verbal objectification. In color, depth, and stylistic originality it rivals some of our best poetry. Look back over Hazlitt's "The Fight" and compare it with Mailer's intellectual reportage of the Ali-Frazier fight in King of the Hill or, "On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth" or, "On Familiar Style"; DeQuincey's "Confessions of an Opium Eater" or "On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth," which begins: "From my boyish days I had always felt a great perplexity on one point in Macbeth"; or Lamb's "The Two Races of Men," "Poor Relations," or "On Sanity of True Genius." Consider too a book like Henry Adams' Education of Henry Adams for its simultaneous treatment of personal and national or historical.

Some essayists, like Montaigne and Emerson, tend toward generality, as reflected in titles like "Friendship" or "Self-Reliance," but tone and source are personal, and we cannot doubt the clear kinship between essays featuring memoir or eyewitness reportage and those of generality, for the same writers do both, sometimes in a single essay, sometimes in separate pieces; and Lamb and Thoreau stand in the same relation to Montaigne and Emerson as fable to moral or parable to proverb. The difference lies not in the fundamental approach, which is in any case personal, but in the degree of explicitness of the theme. "I bear within me the exemplar of the human condition," said Montaigne. Descending deep enough within, the essayist links up personal with universal, self with Self.

### Writing About Reading

These essayists frequently write about their reading, and they love reading. They set, in fact, a model for writing about reading that is very different from writing-as-testing, because **they** have selected what to read according to their own ongoing pursuits, and, because they cite ideas and instances from books in **mixture with** ideas and instances drawn from everyday experience, thus fusing life with literature. Many openly framed assignments that I have long advocated will elicit from students exactly the kinds of essays that constitute our fine heritage in this flexible form. They call for the writer to crystallize memories, capture places, "write a narrative of any sort that makes a general point applying beyond the particular material," "put together three or four incidents drawn from life or reading that all seem to show the same thing, that are connected in your mind by some idea," or "make a general statement about something you have observed to be true, illustrating that truth by referring to events and situations you know or have read of." The point is to **leave subject matter to the writer, including reading selections.** Any student who has done such assignments will be better able, strictly as a bonus, to cough up some prose to show he has done his homework than if he has been especially trained to write about reading.

### Transpersonal, Not Impersonal

Schools mistreat writing because the society suffers at the moment from drastic misunderstandings about the nature of knowledge. Applying "scientific" criteria that would be unacceptable to most real scientists making the breakthroughs out there on the frontier, many people have come to think that subtracting the self makes for objectivity and validity. But depersonalization is not impartiality. It is, quite literally, madness. Einstein said, "The observer is the essence of the situation." It is not by abandoning the self but by developing it that we achieve impartiality and validity. The deeper we go consciously into ourselves, the better chance we have of reaching universality, as Montaigne knew so well. Transpersonal, not impersonal. It is an undeterred faith in this that makes a great writer cultivate his individuality until others feel he speaks for them better than they do themselves. Teachers should be the first to understand this misunderstanding and to start undoing it, so that schooling in general and writing in particular can offset rather than reinforce the problem.

Here are two examples of what we're up against--one from a famous current encyclopedia and one from a leading publisher, typical and telling symptoms. Most English majors probably sampled or at least heard of Sir Thomas Browne, a very individualistic seventeenth-century master of an original prose style, a writer's writer much admired by successors. Of his Pseudodoxia Epidemica Funk and Wagnalls Standard Reference Encyclopedia says, "Its unscientific approach and odd assemblage of obscure facts typify his haphazard erudition," and then concludes the entry: "Despite Browne's deficiencies as a thinker his style entitles him to high rank among the masters of English prose." What this verdict tells me is that the writer of that entry felt overwhelmed by all the books Browne had read that he had not and that he knew far less than he should have known about the enormously important and complex networks of thought and knowledge, called esoteric, that after several millenia of evolution still had great influence on Newton, Bacon, and Descartes (who displayed at times equally "irrational" intellectual behavior). The encyclo-

(cont. on p. 46)

**James Moffett** (cont. from p. 6)

pediast's judgment on such a writer as Browne is nothing but smart-ass chauvinism: permitted to poison basic information sources, it makes "science" as deadly a censor as ever the Church was during its Inquisition.

We can avoid producing Brownes in our school system by having all youngsters read and write the same things--a goal we have closely approximated--and then their approach will not be unscientific, their assemblage odd, their facts obscure, nor their erudition haphazard. And we will have ensured that no one will be able to emulate the great essayists we hold up as models (or even read them with any comprehension). Real essaying cannot thrive without cultivation of the individual. Who would have any reason to read anyone else? (And I want to know how Browne's style could be worth so much if he were merely raving.)

The second example is personal. When I received the edited manuscript of the original edition of Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13 back from the publisher, I was aghast. "My" editor had re-written sentences throughout the whole book to eliminate first-person references and other elements of the author's presence and voice. This included altering diction and sentence structure at times to get a more anonymous or distanced effect. Faced with the appalling labor of restoring all those sentences, I called the editor, furious. She said righteously, "But we always do that--it's policy." It never occurred to her to exempt, or even to warn, an author who wouldn't be publishing the book in the first place if he weren't regarded as some kind of expert in writing.

#### **Remove the Double Standard**

You can't trust your encyclopedia, your publisher, your school administration. And you can't trust yourself until you learn to spot how you too may be spreading the plague, as Camus calls it. The double standard in "Look at the greats, but don't do what they did" naturally goes along with our era of Scientific Inquisition, which is really technocratic plague. Teachers stand in a fine position to spread infection. If you let yourself be

convinced that "personal" or "creative" writing is merely narcissistic, self-indulgent, and weak-minded, then you have just removed your own first person.

---

James Moffett frequently consults, publishes, and lectures on the teaching of writing. He works at his home in Mariposa, California.

---

#### **Two Views** (cont. from p. 9)

to play an important **developmental** role in schools because certain more complex mental abilities are best developed by the practice of writing (Development of Writing, 201-02). In addition, while class size remains high, writing has to substitute for a great deal of interpersonal speech. As Moffett insists and as Britton's research seems to confirm, English teachers perform important educational tasks not accomplished anywhere else. To summarize, their remarks and research add considerable strength to our belief that despite its enormous demands, our profession is humane and worthwhile.

---

Edith Croake teaches composition at Wash-tenaw Community College, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

---

#### **James Britton** (cont. from p. 5)

people we are'. In participant activity it is the construction we place upon the **new**--the current encounter with actuality--that we attend to: as spectators, it is essentially the **total**--the accumulated view of the world that makes us the sort of people we are--that we are concerned with. Thus, though we have assigned a function, a use, to the language of spectatorship, it is a use which is clearly distinguishable from that of a participant. 'Language to get things done' remains intact as a criterion for the one role, and the language of being and becoming may roughly describe the other.

---

James Britton is the author of numerous books in the field of composition theory and research. He is associated with the University of London Institute of Education.