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MODERN TRADITIONS OF THE ESSAY

by

Laurie Lake White

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
1987

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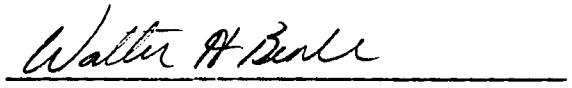

APPROVAL PAGE

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Critical interest in the essay as a genre has increased in recent years with the rise of non-fiction studies focusing on the essay as literary art. The argument of this dissertation is that the essay is best seen as a form of rhetoric, and Walter Beale's theory of discourse provides a theoretical model for this view. Categorizing the essay as rhetorical accounts for the sermonic aim of the form and its protean nature.

The essay's rhetorical aim is connected with the spirit of skepticism which has informed it from its inception. Both Montaigne and Bacon were skeptics, although their anti-dogmatism took different forms. Too, skepticism has been associated with rhetorical practice since Cicero. The weighing of probabilities, the willing suspension of judgment, and the examination of different sides of a question are the characteristics of rhetoricians and skeptics. They are the characteristics, too, of the essay which is, by name and reputation, only a "try," not a system.

In our own day, the popularity of the essay form attests to a new age of skepticism, and a revived interest in rhetorical discourse. The major portion of this work is a study of five modern writers whose essays vary from op-eds to book reviews to autobiographical narratives.

By studying modern practitioners of the two streams of

the essay tradition--the followers of Bacon and Montaigne --we can see the various forms that the persuasive aim of the essay can assume. The rhetorical analyses of three Baconian essayists whose work is characteristically suasory--George Will, Paul Fussell, and Paul Theroux--reveal the voice of the aphorist and sophisticated teacher. On the other hand, analyses of two followers of Montaigne--Lewis Thomas and Joan Didion--reveal their reliance on self-deprecation and lyricism in making their points.

All five of these essayists write reflective-exploratory essays, the oldest category of the essay, the closest to poetic discourse, the most difficult to categorize, and the most volatile. By studying their essays we can see the subtlety of their rhetoric and the connections of their work with deliberative argument as well as fiction and poetry.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE TRUE ESSAY

"The simplest and safest definition of the essay is that it is the kind of composition produced by an essayist."
--J.B. Priestley

Debates about the essay seem curiously old-fashioned in comparison with other literary discussions. Critics still engage in heated arguments over the constitution of the "true essay" long after they have relaxed generic requirements for other kinds of literature. Even the language they use is reminiscent of an earlier, more dogmatic criticism. In a recent article, for example, Richard Chadbourne asserts that American studies of the essay "confirm the belief, hardly new, since many an essayist and student of the essay have held it intuitively without arguing for it, that the essay is indeed a branch of what the Greeks called poetry . . . and what we would call creative or imaginative literature." On the other hand, Quebecois studies of the genre reveal a "deplorable [underlining mine] tendency to equate the essay with non-fiction" (Chadbourne 138, 146). Mary E. Rucker in a 1975 article, "The Literary Essay and the Modern Temper," wonders "just how far may the traditional essay as it was shaped by Montaigne adapt to a dynamic social order without becoming the polemic article?" (323).

This sort of scolding of a "deplorably" wayward genre was common among critics in the twenties discussing the experiments of Faulkner, Eliot, and Woolf. But critics and readers as well grew accustomed to the anarchies of poets and novelists, and gave up attempting to hold authors to strict generic requirements. Not so with the essay. The sort of narrow definition insisted upon by Charles Whitmore in a 1921 article, "The Field of the Essay," is echoed in the most recent articles and dissertations on the essay genre. According to Whitmore, the only "true" essay is the literary or "familiar" essay. He despairs of being able to restrict the term--"the free and easy use has gone on too long to be easily discarded"--but hopes to distinguish "the true essay from the study, the portrait, and the sketch" (564).

In our day, the emotional defense of a genre is uncommon, but in this case it is understandable. Literary critics wish to "save" the essay from the reviled categories of the temporal, the unimaginative, the polemical--in other words, from the netherworld of "non-fiction prose." Their efforts, however have resulted in a reductive narrowing of critical comment on the essay. Even the most liberal critics, such as the deconstructionists who have enlarged the essay category to include literary criticism, resort in most cases to precious argument and hair-splitting when discussing the essay.

Critical confusion about the nature of the essay is a reflection of the larger confusion about the nature of "non-fiction" prose. Recently, the term "literary non-fiction" has come into vogue, both as a refinement of the old category and as an attempt by critics to envision a higher status for some "rhetorical" writing. Nevertheless, "non-fiction" as a term continues to connote the negative. As Norman Podhoretz wrote in 1958:

> [We have all become] so accustomed . . . to thinking in terms of two radically different categories of mind---the imaginative, which is the mind that creates, and the . . . well, there is not even an adequate word for the other kind of mind. 'Critical' won't do because it has too restricted a reference; nor will `philosophical' quite serve. The fact is that our attitude reveals itself beautifully in this terminological difficulty: we call everything that is not fiction or poetry 'non-fiction,' as though whole ranges of human thought had only a negative existence.(77)

In this dissertation, I propose to examine the essay with a more refined instrument than the blunt "non-fiction" specification. I believe that the genre is inherently more rhetorical than poetic, although I agree with other critics that many essays have lasting literary merit, even when conceived in a context of immediacy and the rhetorical imperative. There is nothing remarkable about such a judgment, for this has been the case with other works of rhetoric--from The Republic to Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. Such a view of the essay is easier to articulate

in a climate of renewed respect for rhetorical discourse. Modern rhetoricians, such as Walter Ong, Douglas Ehninger, James Kinneavy and Walter Beale, have alerted us to the variety, complexity, and interdependence of different kinds of discourse, so that the old rough and ready distinctions between "imaginative and factual" or "literary and non-literary" no longer serve.

In this first chapter I want to examine some of the characteristics of the essay traditionally associated with the genre. I believe that these characteristics are symptomatic of the inherently rhetorical nature of the essay, particularly as indicated in Walter Beale's theory of discourse. At the end of the chapter I shall summarize Beale's theory as it concerns the essay genre in its several varieties or sub-genres.

The Essay and Fiction

What distinguishes some essays, particularly personal, reflective pieces from fiction? Did Orwell actually shoot an elephant or E.B. White see two ganders fighting for dominance in the barnyard? How do we distinguish between an obvious bit of fancy (such as Addison's dissertation on a "beau's brain") and a satirical short story? Such questions are best answered by adhering to a contractual idea of discourse, which presupposes a relationship between writer and reader in which the writer supplies certain clues about

the nature of the work. In the case of some essays, there is external evidence that events took place as the author describes. More often, however, readers expect certain things to happen in an essay or other genres because of their reading experiences. This "internal evidence," as critic Robert Davis terms it, is the ground for the author's "implied contract with the reader about the kind of truth that is being offered him" (12).

Davis is not the first critic who has commented on the importance of "internal evidence" for an accurate reading of a piece of discourse. It was Kenneth Burke who defined form as "the arousal and fulfillment of desires" (Counterstatement), and Wayne Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction writes that "imaginative works . . . make us desire a quality" (126). This desire is not only intellectual--a desire for truth--but formal as well. According to Booth, a genre evokes and satisfies certain expectations of "cause and effect," "convention," "abstract forms," and "promised qualities"--distinctive qualities exhibited in the beginning of a work are "promised" to be repeated (Booth 126-128).

This is true of non-fiction works as well. The voice of Montaigne in his Essais is the primary "quality," promised in the first pages, which holds the work together. And, according to Booth, the voice in the Essais is as much an invention as the narrator's voice in a work of fiction.

> If we look closely at the `Montaigne' who emerges from these completed pages, we cannot help rejecting any simple distinction between fiction and biography or essay. The Montaigne of the book is by no stretch of the imagination the real Montaigne, pouring himself onto the page without regard for `aesthetic distance.' (Booth 228)

Booth in his Rhetoric of Fiction brilliantly demonstrates the slipperiness of "simple distinctions" between fiction and rhetorical genres, and the importance of a case-by-case approach to generic criticism based on contracts or "promises" between authors and readers. Nevertheless, since I want to define the genre more precisely than just "fictional non-fiction" I must examine other aspects or "promised qualities" traditionally associated with the genre.

The Essayist's Personal Voice

The oldest form of the essay is the "personal" or "familiar" essay developed by Montaigne. Indeed, as I already mentioned, some critics such as Whitmore hold that it is the only "true" essay. H.V. Routh in his 1920 article, "The Origins of the Essay Compared in English and French Literatures," expresses the traditional notion of the literary essayist as a personal voice speaking directly to a reader:

> Lyric poetry creates a passion; drama creates emotional or mental crisis; epic creates action . . .. None attain their end until they're recited. The essay

> . . . creates . . . its author's point of view. But the essay needs an idiomatic, sinuous and desultory style which can guide us through the labyrinth of a fellow creature's mind, and it does not attain its full effect unless it is read leisurely and in seclusion. (Routh 31)

Routh's comment also suggests the importance of print as the medium for the essay. Only a reader in "seclusion" can follow such a "sinuous" style. The essay's flexibility is connected with its history as a print-based genre, "of all genres the most spontaneous and the least subject to the tyranny of schools," (32), which traditionally are associated with formality and orality. In fact, Routh believes that the salons of seventeenth-century France, with the attendant growth of formalism and schools of literature, contributed to the decline of the familiar essay in that country (34-35).

One of the more interesting quirks of the personal or "familiar" essay, then, is that it seeks to mimic a "personal voice" by relying on the artifice of print. The essay, which is associated with naturalness and conversation, could not have developed fully in an oral culture.[1] Nevertheless, the essay's connections with good conversation are many. As Robert Davis reminds us, many of history's most famous essayists--Shaw, Wilde, Johnson, Auden, Coleridge, Emerson--were also renowned conversationalists. "Much conversation . . . is a testing out of one's opinions, tastes, and characteristic experiences by seeing how others

respond to them or how they might look to other eyes. . . . The essayist can draw upon his best moments in conversation but add and develop in a way that is possible only in a thoughtfully composed piece of writing" (11).

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the emphasis on "good conversation" was reflected in essays. This emphasis was connected with the growth of the middle-class. The newly affluent and upwardly mobile were insecure in their positions and dutifully looked to experts--Castiglione, Bacon, Addison and Steele--for guidance and instruction in the social arts, including the art of conversation. Furthermore, especially in the eighteenth century, "good conversation" usually meant "moral conversation." As George Marr has noted in his book on the periodical essayists, the establishment of middle class morals in reaction to the excesses of the Restoration was a

> positive work of reform, in the shape of supplying subjects for conversation, rules for good manners, and for the observance of the lesser morals which both Addison and Steele could and did present in an attractive manner. (32)

The Essay and the Sermon

Moral instruction is another "promised" quality that an experienced reader expects of an essay. Many years ago, Leslie Stephen located the heart of the essay in rhetorical discourse. He believed that the essayist's moralistic

stance is the most important element of the genre so that the English love of essays can be directly traced to their "love of sermons of all varieties, from sermons in stone to sermons in rhyme" (45).

Literary historians trace the sermonic element in essays throughout the complicated geneology of the genre. Not only does the rhetorical nature of the essay have classical roots--Plutarch's Moralia, Cicero's Distiches--but medieval ones as well in the ecclesiastical oral instruction of the Middle Ages. "Essays were 'spoken essays.' Utterances of teacher/preachers were sermonic" (Dawson and Dawson 5). Both Bacon and Montaigne were moralists, and William Bryan and Ronald Crane believe that they "treated problems of morality in light of classical precept and example . . .[although their view was] morality from the individual's point of view" (xxiii). The tone is very different in Addison and Steele's essays of the Eighteenth Century; the examination of moral problems is as connected with author and audience's preoccupation with respectability as with their yearning for high moral principles.

One of the most nakedly "sermonic" elements in modern essays--the coining and quoting of wise sayings--is a bequest of the Renaissance. Elbert Thompson in his study of The Seventeenth Century English Essay, notes that the composition of aphorisms and maxims "became a common preoccupation in sixteenth-century Italy" as an adjunct to

the study of "statecraft" (Thompson 23). In England, encyclopedic commonplace books provided "sentences, apothegms, and examples from classical literature," all in English, for the writer or speaker who wished a fashionable classical patina to his work (Thompson 11). Robert Davis records Montaigne's debt to Erasmus's Adagia and Colloquia: "Some of Montaigne's essays were like belles pensees . . . dealing rather loosely with a single thought" (1).

The ambition of the middle class was, as is widely noticed, a powerful influence on literature in the Renaissance as well as the eighteenth century. Social insecurity lies behind the popularity of Renaissance emblem books and dialogues on right living. These antedate and contribute to later essays on isolated traits and characteristics of "the gentleman." Descriptions of beaux, gentlemen, and other "types" were part of the tradition of the "character" essay, a category which achieved wide popularity in the seventeenth century, and continued as a staple in the eighteenth in periodical essays. The Theophrastean character sketch, Thompson notes, "had reached England indirectly through the medium of rhetorical text-books, and directly through Casaubon's edition in 1592 and John Healey's English translation that soon followed" (86). By the time Sir Roger de Coverley and Isaac Bickerstaff appeared in Addison's and Steele's papers, the "character" was more than a stick-man

on which to hang a virtue or vice. Thus, the periodical essayist's characters were ancestors of the novelist's. Addison, writes George Marr,

> seems to have had a real genius for tale-telling, and if he had lived in our own day, or even a generation after our own, he might have been a successful novelist (34).

In fact, Marr makes a direct connection between periodical essays and the development of the novel, especially the intrusions of an omniscient, didactic narrator. After all, most novelists even to the present day have also been essayists. Fielding, for example, worked on The Champion before writing Joseph Andrews. Marr mentions the essay-quality of the "asides" and inter-chapters--little sermons--in Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones. He believes

> these interchapters [of Tom Jones] show Fielding at his best, and indicate that the novel was not yet entirely severed from the periodical. The bridge which bridged the gap between the Sir Roger de Coverley series and a novel like Tom Jones had not yet been destroyed. (114)

Essayists of the Nineteenth Century, according to G. Robert Stange (in an article on George Eliot's critical essays) made two great contributions to the essay genre: the nature essay and the literary or critical article. We can still see the rhetorical stance of the essayist behind these two sub-genres, although the "sermonic" quality is more muted. Nevertheless, the nature essay and critical article

did promote certain values. According to Stange, the nature essay was developed "as a reaction to . . . growing urbanism, a response to the newly possible bourgeois luxury." Its intended audience were "city dwellers . . . sheltered from the harsher aspects of outdoor life . . .[and] the values it promoted were distinctly antiurban" (315).

The values promoted by critical articles are often more aesthetic than moral, although, of course, the two are inseparable at some point. The pronouncements of nineteenth century critical essayists were sermonic, and, according to Stange, reflected a growing specialization of knowledge. The "Victorian Sage," as Kathleen Tillotson has called him or her, provided the kind of expert opinion increasingly valued by a population intent on self-improvement and aware that no one person could master and analyze the flood of new information.

In his remarks on Eliot's critical essays, Stange writes that:

> the literary or critical essay, usually in the form of an article in a journal, had become during her lifetime--and has since remained--the dominant form of essay writing. Though critical essays were usually analytic and, to a certain degree, reflective, the intentions of the form marked it off at once from the earlier moral essay. Directed to a definable referent--books or works of art, systems of ideas, intellectual structures--this new kind of essay was valued according to the amount of specialized knowledge the author managed to apply to the subject.(315-316)

The Essay and Criticism

Recently, deconstructionist critics have made even greater claims for the critical essay. Rather than seeing the form as a threat to literature, a rather standard response at mid-century from writers such as Randall Jarrell and Saul Bellow who decried the "Age of Criticism," some critics and writers now began to see the critical essay as the best literature of our time. Geoffrey Hartman is notable in both his championing of and experimentation with the critical essay. Writing in the New York Times Book Review on April 5, 1981, Hartman speaks of the critical essay as:

> prose above all, . . . [as] an essay above all: a literary and experimental work rather than a dogmatic pronouncement. I do not mean, of course, that everyone should purple his prose or load it with literary ornament. But if we are indeed in an Age of Criticism, and if a 'literature of criticism' now exists, and if there is no reason to deny the critical essay a dignity and even a creative touch of its own, then criticism, too, will have to be read closely. It should not be fobbed off as a secondary activity, as a handmaiden to more 'creative' modes of thinking like poems or novels. (1)

Hartman's view thus stated is eminently sensible and in line with a more pluralistic view of discourse than the traditional literary elitist's. He remarks in the same article that the blurring of generic boundaries is a good thing in many ways, giving rise to different forms. Criticism,

believes Hartman, "is creative, that is, within literature rather than outside of it and merely looking in, and it is scientific, and must therefore develop its own language and methodology" (24).

Actually, however, Hartman and other critics who "promote" the value of the critical essay, are traditionalists about discourse in an important way: despite their cries for an egalitarian view of writing, they reveal their literary bias in their insistence on the "literariness" of the critical essay. Hartman, ironically enough, does "purple his prose [and] load it with literary ornament" when he writes critical essays for scholarly publications. Unlike the lucid prose he uses for the general audience of the New York Times, Hartman's literary criticism is as densely textured as "demanding" poetry. The implication is that in order for criticism to be as good as literature--and as autonomous--it must present the same sort of challenge. As Hartman has said in a "literary" critical essay in a 1976 issue of Comparative Literature :

> What I am saying then, pedantically enough, and reducing a significant matter to its formal effect, is that literary commentary may cross the line and become as demanding as literature: it is an unpredictable or unstable 'genre' that cannot be subordinated, a priori, to its referential or commentating function. Commentary certainly remains one of the defining features, for it is hardly useful to describe as criticism an essay that does not review in some way an existing book, show, or documented habit of thought. But the perspectival power of criticism, its strength of recontextualization, must be such that the critical essay should

not be considered a supplement to something else.(265)

While Hartman proclaims that the essay is "as good as" poetry, Georg Lukacs, whose 1910 essay "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" serves as a model for Hartman's speculations about the lofty status of the critical essay (and, one suspects) for Hartman's "purple" style as well), contends that the essay surpasses poetry. Lukacs defines the true essay as the critical essay, but the sort of essay that achieves the status of "intellectual poem" (Lukacs 18). Poetry creates a world from images in the world; the essay, believes Lukacs,

> does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive. And because it orders them anew and does not form something new out of formlessness, it is bound to them and must always speak 'the truth' about them, must find expression for their essential nature. (10)

Richard Chadbourn has noticed the Platonic nature of Lukacs's preference for the formalism of the essay over the images of poetry (140-141). In fact, Lukacs claims that Plato is "the greatest essayist who ever lived or wrote," whose life was inextricably bound to his thought, a life that was the "typical life for the essay form" (13). Socratic humor, the humor that Lukacs believes is an integral part of the essay tradition, is based on the

incongruous intrusion of the world of non-essentials and images into the world of essentials. Socrates's death, as portrayed by Plato, is one of these "intrusions."

> Death does not count here, it cannot be grasped by concepts, it interrupts the great dialogue--the only true reality--just as brutally, and merely from the outside, as those rough tutors who interrupted the conversation with Lysis. Such an interruption, however, can only be viewed humoristically, it has so little connection with that which it interrupts. (14)

This same humorous irony informs the traditional familiar, casual voice of the critic/essayist:

> The irony I mean consists in the critic always speaking about the ultimate problems of life, but in a tone which implies that he is only discussing pictures and books, only the inessential and pretty ornaments of real life--and even then not their innermost substance but only their beautiful and useless surface. Thus each essay appears to be removed as far as possible from life, and the distance between them seems the greater, the more burningly and painfully we sense the actual closeness of the true essence of both. Perhaps the great Sieur de Montaigne felt something like this when he gave his writings the wonderfully elegant and apt title of "Essays". The simple modesty of this word is an arrogant courtesy. The essayist dismisses his own proud hopes which sometimes lead him to believe that he has come close to the ultimate: he has after all, no more to offer than explanations of the poems of others, or at best of his own ideas. But ironically adapts himself to this profound work of the intellect in face of life--and even emphasizes it with ironic modesty.(Lukacs 9-10)

Speculations about the Platonic source of the essayist's traditional irony are a stock in trade of another critic who sets criticism on a lofty plane. Writing almost twenty years before Lukacs, Walter Pater, in his lectures on

Plato, gives an account of "the two streams of Platonism":

> What Plato presents to his readers is then, again, a paradox, or a reconciliation of opposed tendencies: on one side, the largest possible demand for infallible certainty in knowledge (it was he fixed that ideal of absolue truth, to which, vainly perhaps, the human mind, as such, aspires) yet, on the other side, the utmost possible inexactness or contingency, in the method by which he actually proposes to attain it. It has been said that the humour of Socrates of which the famous Socratic irony . . . was an element, is more than a mere personal trait . . . . It belonged, in truth, to the tentative character of dialectic, of question and answer as the method of discovery, of teaching and learning, to the position, in a word, of the philosophic essayist.(188-189)

The "utmost possible inexactness" prized by Pater and Lukacs is also valued by deconstructionist critics such as Hartman who find precedent in Lukacs for their insistence on the arbitrary relation of text and meaning. It must be noted, however, that such radical skepticism is not Platonic. Of course, Lukacs later adopted a stringent system of belief that informed his mature criticism, just as the Deconstructionists' abandonment of interpretation has evolved into a system of interpretation. In criticism, indeed in all sorts of discourse, the Second Law of Thermodynamics seems to operate in reverse.

Tentativeness and the Essay

Some essayists--beginning with Montaigne--are so adept in their use of the undogmatic, self-deprecating voice ("What do I know?") that many readers believe that these

authors are as charmingly feckless as they pretend, and, of course, some essayists <u>are</u> cynics. Actually, however, more often than not, the tentative essayist is more likely to be tentative in his approach to finding the truth than tentative in his belief that truth exists. Pater's connection between Socratic irony and the "tentativeness of dialectic" is important. The academic spirit of open-mindedness and exploration is an essential promised quality in the essay. Of course, some readers lose patience with the skeptical, Socratic method. G.K. Chesterton for instance comments that:

> the wandering thinkers have become our substitute for preaching friars. And whether our system is to be materialist or moralist, or sceptical or transcendental, we need more of a system than that [of the essayist]. After a certain amount of wandering the mind wants either to get there or to go home.(5)

And Lukacs, who admires the essay's lack of system, nevertheless values the genre as a precursor to an ultimate system or "great aesthetic" (17). In the meantime, before the arrival of the great aesthetic, Lukacs sees, as did Pater, the role of the essay as a counterpoint to empirical truth. According to Chadbourne, this view is most forcefully espoused by German critics. In a discussion of Bruno Berger's criticism, Chadbourne summarizes the prevalent German opinion:

> In German scholarship the essay is linked constantly to

> 'Wissenschaft,' that is 'science,' in the root meaning of 'knowledge.' It is the meeting ground between 'pure literature' and 'pure science,' the mediator between 'poetry' and 'science.' It is a means of overcoming the isolation of specialists, of bridging the gap between science and the rest of society, between natural science and humanities. It can provide a synthesis of science and art at a 'common third level,' and on that level, can seek to restore the 'lost unity' of culture, to recapture a world-view (Weltbild), and to counteract the fragmentation of culture, the proliferation of isolated disciplines of learning, in a word, the disintegration of the mind. At this level it goes well beyond criticism in the ordinary narrow sense to become the criticism of life (Lebenskritik), as in the example of the great Romance philologist, Ernst Curtius. . . .(142)

The Essay and Rhetoric

The German view of the essay as "mediator" between science and poetry, as a bridge between the two cultures, is consistent with a view of the genre as a rhetorical production. As Walter Beale has written,

> The other aims of discourse involve, in varying degrees, specializations and conventionalizations of discourse; the movement of rhetoric by contrast, is in every case toward the common interests, the common capabilities, and the common norms and values of communities. (192)

The characteristics traditionally ascribed to the essay that I have discussed--its sermonic or suasory nature, with attendant choices of personal or impersonal voice, aphoristic or narrative style and so on, and its concern with probabilities rather than empirical truths which make any judgment tentative in the long run--are essential

hallmarks of rhetorical discourse.

But many literary critics persist in seeing rhetoric as a handmaiden or, at best, a poor relation to serious prose. Because of this, they labor mightily to save the essay from the stigma of being categorized as rhetoric, sharing a bed with the deservedly reviled modern public speech.

By "saving" the essay from rhetoric, however, literary critics have succeeded in obstructing the generic classification of non-fiction prose. In one sense, the essay is the equivalent of the ancient public speech, and, as such, is the essential rhetorical production. Rhetoric was developed to address problems of public concern; Aristotle saw it as a tool to persuade a general audience about questions of communal policy and value. The public speech was the vehicle of communication, since it reached the largest possible audience. Written material was for the private study of a selected audience, since its production was such a laborious, time-consuming process, and literacy was a rarity. The situation is reversed today. The invention of print has made written material the most efficient method of disseminating information and argument. A public speech is addressed to a more specific, isolated audience than a syndicated column, for example.

Of course, as Walter J. Ong has noted, the electronic media have made this analysis trickier, since many people, who can read, are choosing to receive much if not virtually

all their information from television and radio. Nevertheless, a broadcast speech is usually a poor thing in comparison to a deliberative essay. Perhaps we have lost the ability to pay attention to a well-constructed verbal argument; it is certainly true that speechmakers are relying on visual and aural pyrotechnics rather than sound, tight arguments. Many essayists, however, have honed their rhetorical skills to a razor's edge. The casual, intimate voice and a seemingly discursive method of construction are effective charms to conceal a serious rhetorical intention--as effective as they were for Montaigne. So too is the cool "right reason" of literary and political critics, a legacy from the sermon and medieval lecture. The modern essay is a chameleon of various techniques, stylistic and literary as well as dialectical, designed to persuade general audiences.

Lukacs is quite right to claim that the essay is as good as poetry, but he is wrong in believing that it is better. It is, simply, different. Hierarchical notions of discourse are reductive in that one or another genre is always in eclipse. One can believe in an ultimate truth as did Plato and proceed in a skeptical, juridical way to find it.[2] Different versions of truth are so essential, that any discourse theory must reflect a non-hierarchical orientation toward the productions that communicate these versions. Within genres, there are differences in quality, but not

between genres. C.S. Lewis's comments on literary genres in his essay "High and Low Brows" applies equally well to other genres of discourse:

> We have now made a fairly determined effort to find some useful meaning for the separation of literature into the two classes of classical and popular, Good Books and Books, literary and commercial, highbrow and lowbrow, and we have failed. In fact, the distinction rests upon a confusion between degrees of merit and differences of kind. Our map of literature has been made to look like an examination list--a single column of names with a horizontal line drawn across it, the honour candidates above that line, and the pass candidates below it. But we ought rather to have a whole series of vertical lines representing different kinds of work, and an almost infinite series of horizontal lines crossing these to represent the different degrees of goodness in each kind.(276)

Rhetoricians have provided any number of perspectives on discourse, but for the purposes of analyzing whole works, I will rely on only two theories--James Kinneavy's and Walter Beale's. Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse broke new ground in analyzing works in a non-reductive, non-hierarchical manner. However, Kinneavy's notion of "Expressive" discourse, the category to which he assigns the essay, is troubling in that he does not account for suasory and informative aspects of the essay. Furthermore, his category of "expressive" writing confuses genre with mode. Beale's theory, on the other hand, is more comprehensive, especially his analysis of rhetorical genres.

Beale believes that it is important to remember that style and a way of conducting discourse are not inherent in

a genre; a generic classification can be thrust upon a piece of discourse only after account is taken of its context. He divides discourse into four broad "Aims": Scientific, Instrumental, Poetic, and Rhetorical. Beale's analysis of rhetorical discourse is particularly useful for a comprehension of "the essay" as genre:

> [Rhetorical discourse's] primary aim is to influence the understanding and conduct of human affairs. It operates typically in matters of action that involve the well-being and destiny of communities and of individuals within them; and in matters of value and understanding which involve the communal and competing values of communities. Rhetorical writing includes a broad range of types, from deliberative essays to popular information, to occasional and reflective pieces, to commercial promotions, to the public resolutions and declarations of competing groups within a community. (94)

Essential to Beale's conception of rhetoric is its centrality as an aim, not its relative lack of specialization. He defines the primary "motive" or specific aim within the larger aim of rhetoric as "the formation and information of opinion." The other specific aims or "motives" of rhetoric mirror the larger aims of discourse.

> To the extent that [rhetoric] seeks to establish stable and incontrovertible propositions of understanding, it moves in the direction of science; to the extent that it takes on the capability of directing human activities, as in the areas of information and certain types of resolution-making, it becomes instrumental; when the motives of formal beauty and enjoyment come into the picture, as very often happens in 'familiar' and reflective writing, rhetoric takes a turn toward poetic.(96)

In the chapters which follow, I intend to use Beale's terms in referring to specific essays. Nevertheless, I strongly concur with his contention that describing generic norms in no way reflects a desire for a dogmatic system of standardization and acountability; as Beale explains,

> An individual work of discourse succeeds partly by conforming to the norms and constraints of a given rhetorical genre, partly by transcending them, sometimes even by flouting them. . . [This] theory . . . has no stake in suppressing these variations and novelties; its goal is to account for them . . . in a more satisfactory, more provocative, and less reductive way than do competing theories. (115)

Beale is most comprehensive in his analysis of rhetorical genres or "genuses," which he defines as deliberative, informative, performative, and reflective/exploratory. Interestingly, these genuses correspond to the larger aims of discourse. Following Beale's definitions of rhetorical genuses, a deliberative essay supports "opinions or theses about specific problems of policy, value, or understanding in human communities." A performative essay "perform[s] various acts of declaration, celebration, or commemoration in a public arena, calling into play and reinforcing the values of a particular community." An informative essay "form[s] and inform[s] public opinion through the non-technical and even entertaining presentation of subject matter. It may incorporate a number of secondary or covert motives, such as promoting its subject or a certain attitude toward

its subject." A reflective/exploratory essay "share[s], explore[s], and reflect[s] upon human experiences, usually in a highly individualistic and entertaining way. It uses various presentational forms, sometimes borrowed from literary art, to relate personal experiences and reflections to general questions of understanding and value" (114-115). Of course, as is the case with any piece of discourse, no essay is purely one thing or another; nevertheless, this categorization is a pragmatic tool for placing essays according to their aims.

In the next chapters I shall use Beale's model in my discussion of examples of modern traditions of the essay genre. Before turning to individual examples, however, I want to examine in the next chapter one of the "promised qualities" of the essay which has received short shrift, and which seems essential to a rhetorical view of the essay--that is, the skeptical or "tentative" stance of the essayist, a stance which is as well suited to our own Age of Information as it was to Montaigne's.

Notes

[1] See Chapter Three in Walter J. Ong's Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology in which he discusses the limited generic possibilities in oral cultrues. The artistic rendering of free flowing conversation which is the hallmark of the essay would be impossible in an oral culture since oral literary genres depend on repetition, symmetry and other mnemonic and schematic devices for comprehensibility. Print makes such devices less necessary.

[2] See Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation (London: U of Notre Dame P, 1969).

CHAPTER TWO

SKEPTICISM AND THE SPIRIT OF THE ESSAY

"The essay is science minus the explicit proof."
--Ortega y Gasset

In Chapter One I provided an overview of the history of the essay especially as it relates to Walter Beale's classification of the genre as rhetorical discourse. In this chapter I wish to speculate about some of the contemporary trends in American life and letters which have influenced the increasing importance of the essay. I particularly want to explore some parallels between our own cultural milieu and the climate of skepticism that characterized the Renaissance and gave rise to the essay. It is always risky to comment on ones own time, but, fortunately, I am able to use as support the work of a number of critics of recent years who have analyzed the so-called "new journalism." Since a good deal of "new journalism" writing crosses over from reportage into the essay, the debate about the lineage and characteristics of new journalism is important to this study; critics recognize the rhetorical base common to both.

In the last few years an interesting critical debate has centered on the generic classification of the style of journalism developed by Hunter Thompson, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion and others. Ronald Weber's The Literature of Fact, John Hollowell's Fact and Fiction, and John Hellmann's Fables of Fact are typical of the critical works inspired by new journalism. The titles of these books indicate the direction of the debate about new journalism: the old lines between fact and fiction have broken down and the new journalism represents a hybrid or "bastard form," as Weber calls it (27).

Underlying these works is a desire to refute the sharp criticisms levelled at new journalism by those journalists and critics who maintain that factual reporting must not be corrupted by fiction. The following quotation from Wayne Booth's "Now Don't Try to Reason with Me" exemplifies this sort of criticism, in this instance an attack on the "paralogical rhetoric" of modern journalism:

> Everyone knows that journalism has been transformed in recent years, especially in the news magazines, from reportage into new forms of paralogical rhetoric: political argument disguised as dramatic reporting. It would be fun to spend the rest of my hour simply describing the new rhetorical devices, and the new twists on old devices, that Time magazine . . . exhibits from week to week, all in the name of news. Mr. Ralph Ingersol, former publisher of the magazine, has described the key to the magazine's success as the discovery of how to turn news into fiction, giving each story its own literary form, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, regardless of whether the story thus invented matches the original event. Everyone I

> know who has ever been treated by Time--whether favorably or unfavorably--has been shocked by the distortion of fact for effect, and the more they know about a subject the more they are shocked.(10)

Many of the proponents of new journalism go to great lengths to legitimize the genre by attempting to demonstrate its literary as well as factual integrity. "The end [of new journalism] is that of all serious fiction and most especially of fabulist fiction: the perceiving and creating of patterns by which the individual can meaningfully experience his world," observes Hellmann (140). "Whether or not," writes Hollowell, "the new journalism prospers in the years to come, the best writers in the genre have already begun to convert the inchoate material of our experience into the meaningful structures of art" (152).

We should note the assumption that lies behind Hollowell's remark: experience is "inchoate," while art brings order. This superficial line of reasoning is a kind of humanist fallacy which underlies much criticism and results in preciosity and reduction. Although in general these critics recognize the importance of the journalistic/factual component of the new journalism, nevertheless, they usually classify the form as literature. Hellmann, for example, draws on Northrop Frye's theory of modes to make a case that new journalism is "literary" rather than "assertive." "[It] is the genre of fiction in which the text, while (like other

genres of fiction) pointing finally or ultimately inward, points outward to the actual world without ever deviating from observation of that world except in forms--such as authorial speculation or fantasy--which are immediately obvious as such to the reader"(27).

Critics of the new journalism and the "non-fiction novel," an extended piece of new journalism such as Truman Capote's In Cold Blood, have been concerned with the personal stance of authors in these genres. Weber believes the unabashed involvement of reporter/participants has incited the most critical comment, negative and positive (26). Hellmann asserts, for example, that the difference between conventional and new journalism is essentially the "conflict of disguised perspective versus an admitted one, and a corporate fiction versus a personal one" (4).

Most new journalism critics and practitioners acknowledge a debt to the essay, but maintain that new journalism is something different. Such dogmatism is curious given the many examples from the essay genre that fit the criteria for new journalism. Even critics' description of the form of new journalism articles is synonymous with that of many traditional essays. Hellmann's discussion, for example, of the similarities in theme and technique of "fabulist fiction" and "new journalism" offers a kind of blue-print of the traditional familiar essay:

> [They] . . . often organize their materials into narratives 'framed' by forewords, afterwords, or other devices. Both use a self-conscious and highly obtrusive narrator, alter the usual conventions of punctuation or graphic composition and are either episodic or obviously contrived (instead of conventionally patterned to and from a climax). Both use allegorical mythic patterns drawn from classical and popular-culture sources, have heavily mannered styles, and adopt a stance of parody or satire. They are also characterized by a concern with large philosophical and social issues.(13-14)

The origin of new journalism in newspaper feature writing gives it a different patina and "feel" from the traditional essay, but, nevertheless, with the exception of unconventional punctuation, this list of characteristics fits even the oldest essays--Montaigne's "To flee from sensual pleasures at the price of life," or Addison's "dream visions" in the Spectator, for example.

Tom Wolfe makes a salient point: the traditional essayist

> has usually not done nearly enough reporting, nor the right type of reporting, to use the devices the new genre [new journalism] depends on. . . . The genteel tradition in nonfiction is summed up in the phrase 'the polite essay.' Legwork, 'digging,' reporting, especially reporting of the Locker Room Genre, is . . . well, beneath one's dignity. (43)

Wolfe is essentially correct in his distinction between "genteel" essays and new journalism. On the other hand, he overlooks some important historical developments in the essay tradition. What Wolfe is arguing for is a more committed stance by the journalist--in short, a more

blatantly rhetorical stance. But what of the many essays that do offer a heavily rhetorical perspective, such as Orwell's pieces on the Spanish Civil War? No critic of the "new" journalism has taken into account such essays. The explanation, of course, is simple. Seeing the "true" essay as a literary rather than rhetorical genre casts other, more overtly argumentative pieces into the murky swamp of non-fiction to be hauled out by critics with boathooks variously labelled "new journalism" or "non-fiction novel." Writers such as Hellmann reveal their prejudices--and confuse the issue further--by then insisting that the "rescued" non-fictional genre actually must be literary/fictional because it is worthy. Rarely has a critical argument moved in such a perfect circle.

Critics of "literary non-fiction," although misled in their generic classifications, are illuminating in their explanations for the phenomenal success and dominance of non-fiction in the last few decades. Their interpretations and those of other critics interested in non-fiction discourse, fall into two categories--sociological and literary.

The Sociological Explanation

The more high-flying, romantic explanation of the proliferation and success of non-fiction prose is the "nature of the times" argument, in which twentieth-century

America is viewed as poised on the edge of the Millennium--the "Grim Slide" view as Tom Wolfe has called it. This dramatic conception is shared by a surprising number of practitioners and critics of new journalism. Hollowell accurately exemplifies this particular explanation:

> The best new journalism is a reflection of our unusual self-consciousness about the historical importance of our time. The assumption underlying most of the books of nonfiction I have discussed is that future historians will find these years unique, perhaps even part of a fundamental watershed in human consciousness.(147)

Hellmann as well as other critics believe "the times" have become too complicated for the traditional genres of journalism and fiction to summarize and explain:

> Unable to capture American reality through realism, and convinced that America's problems were now too profound for the social and psychological levels that realism most effectively probed, [novelists in the 60's] sought to create autonomous worlds which would indirectly probe and illuminate the actual one.(10)

Hollowell believes that traditional literary realism, which had provided a good deal of the explanation and comment on the social upheavals of the nineteenth century, was unable to perform this same function in the sixties, and the new journalism filled the vacuum. Nineteenth century realism depended on its readers belief in external reality;

> but for most Americans in the 1960's--central reality was that everyday life now involved implausible characters and events delivered into the home by the

> media. The realm of the believable had become an extremely doubtful concept. (9)

One can acknowledge the extraordinary ferment and color of American society in the sixties as well as the contribution of the media, especially television news, to that ferment without taking on the baleful tones of the apocalyptic critics; supposing that people are more interesting and times more dangerous than ever before is a form of melodramatic posturing in the long run. A critic who assumes such a stance risks becoming the butt of satirical essays by the same writers he seeks to promote. Affectation is still the true source of the ridiculous.

The safest critical path, I believe, to pursue in discussing the current success of essayists/new journalists is to emphasize the rhetorical aim of such writers--their function as commentators on manners and morals. As Hollowell has said, "When the new journalism holds up a mirror to a small portion of the total social fabric--stock-car racers, drug freaks in San Francisco, a political convention--it succeeds best" (151). Now, as in the Renaissance or the Enlightenment or the Victorian Age, times are interesting and perhaps more confusing because we have more access to information. To sort things out, we look to latter day Bacons, Steeles, Bagehots, or Emersons to provide explanation and critical comment.

The Literary Explanation

Fiction writers, of course, also try to explain us to ourselves, especially in the last few years with an increasing number of heavily rhetorical novels and short stories: Doctorow's Ragtime, John Irving's Cider House Rules, A.N. Wilson's Gentlemen in England, and Walker Percy's Love in the Ruins, for example. These works inhabit the borderland between poetic and rhetorical literature--a DMZ traditionally populated by expressive essays, autobiographies, satirical poems and stories. Tom Wolfe's assessment of the arhetorical nature of fiction in the Sixties does not apply as aptly to the Eighties. Nevertheless, Wolfe's analysis of the rise of non-fiction rings true:

> By the Sixties . . . the most serious, ambitious and, presumably, talented novelists had abandoned the richest terrain of the novel: namely, society, the social tableau, manners and morals, the whole business of 'the way we live now,' in Trollope's phrase. . . . There is no novelist who will be remembered as the novelist who captured the Sixties in America, or even in New York, in the sense that Thackeray was the chronicler of London in the 1840's and Balzac was the chronicler of Paris and all of France after the fall of the Empire. Balzac prided himself on being 'the secretary of French society.' Most serious American novelists would rather cut their wrists than be known as 'the secretary of American society,' and not merely because of ideological considerations. With fable, myth and the sacred office [the novel as the spiritual genre] to think about--who wants such a menial role?

> That was marvelous for journalists--I can tell you that. The Sixties was one of the most extraordinary decades in American history in terms of manners and morals. Manners and morals were the history of the Sixties. . . . [The] whole side of American life that gushed forth when postwar American affluence finally blew the lid off--all this novelists simply turned away from, gave up by default. That left a huge gap in American letters, a gap big enough to drive an ungainly Reo rig like the New Journalism through.(30-31)

Although the public may read more "ungainly" non-fiction, they continue to revere fiction and poetry as elite forms of discourse. Explanations for the continuing high status of fiction and poetry are many and varied: from Norman Podhoretz's view that the status is a vestige of nineteenth century Romanticism with its cult of poet/seers to Julian Jayne's speculation that it is a vestige of the prehistoric bicameral mind.

Podhoretz's view is shared by the "ecological" critics who have emerged as a counter movement to post-structuralism.[1] These critics emphasize the historical and rhetorical dimensions of literature--the context of individual works dependent on other works of literature and society--disdaining the view that literature is the preserve of an educated elite, the notion fostered by a long line of critics from Matthew Arnold to F.R. Leavis. David Morse in his critical essay "Author-Reader-Language: Reflections on a Critical Closed Circuit," echoes Podhoretz's view that the Romantic notion of the artist led irrevocably to the isolation of writers from their historical milieu.

> In general terms the belief the writer transcends his time is one of considerable antiquity, but I believe the particular version of it that enjoys currency has its sources in the Weimar 'Classicism' of Goethe and Schiller. Both were afflicted by the anxiety of the modern; they feared that the degraded world in which they lived might prove disabling and incapacitating for the production of great art.(53)

The audience for serious modern literature is specialized--F.R. Leavis's "tiny minority" who are trained to understand highly idiosyncratic texts. As C.S. Lewis once mused in an address entitled "De Descriptione Temporum,"

> In music we have pieces which demand more talent in the performer than in the composer. Why should there not come a period when the art of writing poetry stands lower than the art of reading it? Of course rival readings would then cease to be 'right' or 'wrong' and become more and less brilliant 'performances.' (9)

"Untrained" readers have increasingly turned to non-fiction as a source of interpretation and entertainment. This trend can be traced in the changing contents of magazines and newspapers. The proportion of fiction to non-fiction in American "quality magazines"--Atlantic, Harper's, etc.--has diminished significantly in this century. As the means for disseminating information became more sophisticated and literacy became more widespread, readers' demand for "the news" became more insistent. In an article entitled "The Literary Essay and the Modern Temper," Mary Rucker discusses the "democratization" of quality magazines as it affected the fortunes of fiction and the "familiar" essay:

> The commercial basis of the press, the redistribution of income resulting from urbanization, and the collectivist theory of society disallowed the elitism which characterized the quality magazines of the early nineteenth century, and as the mass media were institutionalized, many magazines ceased to be primarily literary. They were not only democratized but also standardized in content and technique, tending to perpetuate the status quo as they assumed their responsibility to readers in a world that has often been too complex to experience at first hand.(326)

Although wrong in her assessment of the "decline" of the essay (i.e. familiar essay), Rucker is right to see the new journalism as an extension of the essay tradition, "an amalgamation of the conventional article and the familiar essay" (333). She is also right in perceiving the new journalism as "bridg[ing] the gap between life and culture," a gap between pure information and pure literature.

As the Age of Information has proceeded, readers have become more sophisticated in their assessments of news. The skepticism that characterizes current opinions of the press can be traced to this increasing sophistication. "Mass media," writes Hellmann, "confront the individual with a national news comprised of distorted images and short-circuiting information, while failing to offer the individual a meaningful relation to it" (2). On the other hand, the printed word may be increasingly valued as a means of assessing the unceasing flow of information from the electronic media. Ben H. Bagdikian in his book The Information Machines: Their Impact on Men and the Media asserts

that print journalism serves an increasingly critical, evaluative function as television delivers (or pretends to deliver) more and more "straight" news. Much of this critical evaluation is contained in deliberative essays.

Because serious fiction and poetry are often isolated from the main stream, even the well-educated main stream, and because facts no longer captivate and convince as in the old "Industry on Parade" days, essays, whether in the form of newspaper editorials, new journalism features, or syndicated columns, provide a necessary gloss on contemporary society. Non-specialists, the general reading public, have turned increasingly to the essay and other works of non-fiction as a means of interpreting the confusions and complexities of "pure" technology/science and elitist literature. It is interesting that many of the best essays, which are the bedrock of contemporary rhetorical non-fiction, are written by scientists or fiction writers, for example Lewis Thomas and Joan Didion, who themselves are trying to find a middle way in the midst of the specialized conversations of science and literature.

The search for a "middle way" is characteristic of all eras of extraordinary social ferment and change. Such was the case in the Renaissance which saw the birth of modern science and the death of scholasticism, resulting in the emergence not only of new information, but, indeed, a new way of interpreting reality. Basil Willey believes that "a

general demand for restatement or explanation" which we associate with the Renaissance humanists (and essayists)

> indicates a disharmony between traditional explanations and current needs. It does not necessarily imply the 'falsehood' of the older statement; it may merely mean that men now wish to live and to act according to a different formula. (11)

Although our own age seems almost as hungry for a "different formula" as was the Renaissance, now the missing component is exactly the opposite: "Science was undoubtedly what was most needed at the beginning of the seventeenth century; and . . . religion (but not scholasticism) is what is most needed now" (Willey 43).

The urge for restatement and explanation, as well as calling attention to the missing components of our version of reality, continues to characterize the "essayistic spirit" and, in a larger sense, the rhetorical spirit. Finding a middle way means not only acknowledging the claims of the competing truths of physics and metaphysics, of materialism and abstraction, but also formulating versions of reality that avoid the extremes of both dogmatism and of radical skepticism. This is an essentially "rhetorical" challenge, one that energized the classical tradition of Aristotle and Isocrates (Beale 161-162). It was also of great interest to Renaissance thinkers and essayists like Bacon and Browne. We forget that the scientific revolution that began in the Renaissance was at first a liberation from

dogma, a catalyst to reexamine the world. We forget because empiricism and the scientific method hardened into the dogma we now defy. John M. Steadman's description in The Hill and the Labyrinth of the Renaissance philosophical balancing act applies equally well to contemporary essayists:

> In seventeenth century England the problem of finding a middle way between the extremes of dogmatic claims to absolute certitude, on the one hand, and total skepticism, on the other, confronts the theologian and the scientist alike; significantly, several of the writers who grapple with this problem are either scientists deeply interested in theology, or else churchmen who are also 'virtuosi' and apologists for the new science. (16)

The Skeptical Temper

What is needed is a descriptive definition for this temper or attitude, the temper that informs the essay. "Fideism," that is, a belief in the existence of ultimate truth accompanied by an equally strong belief that our means for reaching that truth are always inadequate, has strong theological overtones and cannot be extended very readily to secular forms of doubt-belief. However, "skepticism"--rightly defined--connotes secular and theological anti-dogmatism as well as rhetorical pragmatism.

By skepticism "rightly defined" I mean the sort of habit of mind exemplified not only in essays but in metaphysical poetry--thriving on paradox and the ironies and ambiguities of human existence. As Margaret Wiley claims in

her study of the influence of Renaissance skepticism on literature The Subtle Knot, this "right" notion of skepticism is all too often superseded by the eighteenth-century connotation of cynicism. (A fairly recent and influential example of this modern use of the term is contained in Wayne Booth's Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent, in which Booth equates the "skepticism" of the sixties and seventies with a sort of fatalism. For our purposes, the habit of mind that Booth is describing would be more accurately termed "radical skepticism" or nihilism.) What encouraged the liberating spirit of skepticism that characterized the Renaissance? First, Renaissance humanists were the recipients of a tradition of disputation and analysis of texts and ideas from different vantage points. This was nourished by their rediscovery of the Classics. According to Barbara Bowen in The Age of Bluff, paradox and irony were very important to most writers of any influence in the Ancient world (10). She cites Plato`s dialectical and Lucian's paradoxical dialogues as well as Plutarch's Lives which are "based on the paradox of resemblances"(10). More importantly, according to Bowen, Renaissance writers were familiar with scholastic "disputation" and medieval Biblical exegesis, which interpreted scriptures literally, tropologically, allegorically, and anagogically--"the exact opposite," comments Bowen, "of our own either/or complex" (10). It is ironic that modern readers and writers often have a

more stubbornly literal orientation toward texts than did those of the Renaissance, trained in the methods of the Middle Ages.

This grounding in ambiguity and disputation helped Renaissance thinkers see many sides of an idea or argument. According to Wiley, the "new learning," especially the "new science," encouraged a suspension of judgment until all the facts were in, and Renaissance writers found a valuable precedent for this habit of suspending judgment in the tradition of classical skepticism or Pyrrhonism (10). Wiley's description of the "pattern" of skepticism is useful in understanding the essentially skeptical nature of the essay:

> This includes, in whatever order, a sense of the inadequacy of human knowledge, a consequent sensitivity to dualisms and contradictions, a concern with paradox as expressing the complexity of truth, a belief in the wholesome effect of doubt, and a conviction that where knowledge falters, a right life can supply the only legitimate confidence known to man (59).

Unlike skeptics in the ancient world, Renaissance and modern skeptics see skepticism as a prelude or a "stepping-stone," as V. Cauchy terms it, to a new phase--"a mind receptive to revelation, science or philosophical intuition"(278). For example, the usual motivation of a Renaissance writer, believes Bowen, is to "disconcert" his reader, "to open up as many different perspectives as possible. This explains why, rather than symmetry, order

and balance, he will prefer paradox, enigma, argument, antithesis, and ambiguity" (6-7).

The connections between skeptical philosophy and rhetorical practice are clear. Both are concerned with means rather than ends. Margaret Wiley's assessment of the skeptical enterprise is also true of the rhetorical:

> The emphasis of the sceptic, because he is interested in breaking up the narrow molds of dogmatisms, is upon the means he is using to arrive at a decision rather than upon the decision itself.(18)

Wiley also notes the central importance of probability in the deliberations of the skeptic: "There is an intermediate process by which the sceptic utilizes probability as a basis for action when he cannot determine where the truth lies" (21).

Skepticism and rhetoric were intertwined from the beginning. Victoria Kahn in Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance examines the contribution of Cicero to the conception of the orator as Academic or Platonic skeptic. She believes that Aristotle's emphasis on the "realm of the probable" as the proper field of rhetoric implies this connection (35). She lists three areas of commonality between the orator and the skeptic as articulated by Cicero: 1. "Since man, according to the skeptic can know nothing absolutely, he is always concerned with the realm of the contingent and the probable, that is, the

realm of rhetoric." 2. "Furthermore, while the skeptic is traditionally less concerned than the orator with persuasion to action within this realm, he shares with the orator a refusal of dogmatism and an ability to 'speak persuasively on any side of any philosophical question.'" 3. "Finally, the academic skeptic believes that within the contingent realm of human life the genuine exchange of ideas and opposing arguments in rhetorical debate will elicit the practical truth we know as consensus" (35-36).[2]

Anti-Ciceronian Style

In trying to characterize the philosophical underpinnings of the essay, we must place Cicero's positive contribution to our notions of the connections between rhetoric and skepticism alongside his negative contribution, that is, the traditionally plain or "anti-Ciceronian" style of the essay. The Anti-Ciceronian movement was pre-eminent in the Renaissance; as Douglas Bush has noted, it was the "complement" in prose of metaphysical poetry. Bush sums up the movement as:

> a revolt against the glowing oratorical period and the established verities which it commonly expressed, and an attempt to create a medium fitted to render the realistic questionings, complexities, and diversities of private experience in a world of changing values. (132)

The Anti-Ciceronian style was "concise, flexible, semi-colloquial" (192).

Bush, like most critics of seventeenth-century literature, draws on the seminal work of Morris Croll in his discussion of the Anti-Ciceronian movement. Croll not only characterized the movement but analyzed the connections between Anti-Ciceronianism and Stoic philosophy. In the seventeenth century, as in our own day, Stoicism and skepticism are strangely allied. As Ted-Larry Pebworth observes in a 1972 PMLA article ("'Real English Evidence': Stoicism and the English Essay Tradition"), Stoicism, as a prevailing philosophy, emerges in times of great turbulence and confusion, and melancholy, like an underground river, nourishes the Stoic temper (101-102).

Croll's account of Stoic rhetoric, as developed in Greece and Rome, bears directly on the development of the essay. Stoic rhetoric was derived from Aristotlean rhetoric and emphasized clarity, brevity, and appropriateness. The Ancient Stoics, like Renaissance skeptics, or "libertines" as Croll calls them, believed that truth was elusive and our comprehension of it fragmentary.

> A style appropriate to the mind of the speaker [believed the Stoics] . . . is one that portrays the process of acquiring the truth rather than the secure possession of it, and expresses ideas not only with clearness and brevity, but also with the ardor in which they were first conceived. (89)

The Stoic rhetoricians' emphasis on brevity was connected with their belief in individual experience and enlightenment. As Croll observes:

> In the history of all the epochs and schools of writing it is found that those which aimed at the expression of individual experience have tended to break up the long musical periods of public discourse into short, incisive members, connected with each other by only the slightest of ligatures, each one carrying a stronger emphasis, conveying a sharper meaning than it would have if it were more strictly subordinated to the general effect of a whole period. Such a style is a protest against easy knowledge and the complacent acceptance of appearances. (87)

Anti-dogmatism and individualism pervade Stoic philosophy as they do the writings of the essayists, who were, as Pebworth and other critics have observed, all Anti-Ciceronians.

Croll suggests that Montaigne and his "Libertine" followers advanced from Stoical to skeptical habits of thought. Their temper was more buoyant and expansive than that of the controlled Stoics, and as skeptics, valued reason less:

> Certain traits of character and temper are common to sceptical rationalists of all periods. Curiosity about new ideas, for example, and readiness to adopt new opinions, an individual turn of wit and a constant tendency toward satire--these are traits just as conspicuous in scholars like Petrarch, Politian, and Erasmus as they are in their successors, the libertines of the later Renaissance.(160)

Montaigne and Bacon

Croll's contrasting of Montaigne and Bacon is a standard convention in criticism of Renaissance prose style and of the essay. Croll excepted, however, most critics wrongly see the Montaigne and Baconian schools as antithetical. On the contrary, both attempt to reproduce the stoical-skeptical brand of truth-seeking which clears the decks of cant while emphasizing the individual differences neglected and obscured by scholasticism just as science in our own day has neglected and obscured individual differences. Their essays, like those of their modern successors, seek to debunk and illuminate, while always maintaining their assumed identities of "mere," inconclusive attempts.

Montaigne, according to Croll,

> discovered that the progress of rationalism meant much more than a change of orthodoxies, meant nothing less in fact than the full exercise of curiosity and the free play of individual differences. (180)

Wit, personality, and spontaniety were and are the hallmarks of the Montaignesque essay. Bacon's essays, on the other hand, represented a different side of the anti-Ciceronian temper, the

> desire for ceremonious dignity, an ideal of deliberate and grave demeanor, which was partly, no doubt, an inheritance from the courtly past but was modified and indeed largely created by the profound moral experience which the new age was undergoing. (194)

According to Croll, Bacon's contributions to Renaissance prose style were largely a result of his ability to read Tacitus, a skill shared by few of his time. Gravity as a component of anti-Ciceronian style was an inheritance from Tacitus and Bacon's imitation of him (194-195).

Both Bacon and Montaigne shared an "anti-Ciceronian" hatred of dogmatic complacency. The skeptical temper that informs their essays, their "mere" attempts, informs the essays of today. Skeptics, according to Wiley, are interested in the "tendencies and spirits of objects, not their intrinsic value" (23). Their philosophical orientation is predicated on the unceasing change and flux in human affairs. Bacon and Montaigne, and their followers, like Wiley's skeptics, often exhibit a "mildness in their treatment of human beings"(38) because they sympathize with even as they satirize our feeble attempts to make sense of the universe.

These traditions, which share a common spirit of anti-dogmatism, nevertheless are characterized by two very different techniques or methods: Bacon's use of the aphorism and Montaigne's of the exemplum. As Elbert Thompson observes,

> Where the French writer is diffuse and informal, Bacon is terse and aphoristic; and Montaigne's early essays are tissues of examples where Bacon's first essays are absolutely without them.(23)

I do not suggest that the two essay schools can be neatly categorized since both borrow freely from the other tradition. However, a discussion of the aphorism and exemplum as used by the founders of the essay offers essential background and explanation for my analysis of modern traditions of the essay in the following chapters.

The Aphorism

It is curious that the aphorism, which on the face of it looks anything but skeptical, is nevertheless connected by history and rhetorical practice with anti-dogmatic thought. The Renaissance revived the use of the aphorism; its chief proponent and practitioner was Bacon. Although Bacon's aphorism is closely related to the proverb, maxim, sentence, epigram, and apothegm, it has a less metaphorical cast and a more universal character. Commentators on the modern version of the aphorism still insist on the independent, universality of the form.

According to James Stephens in his Francis Bacon and the Style of Science, Bacon's use of the aphorism not only "owes something to classical and Renaissance descriptions of witty forms of discourse," but is "also a method for handing on the lamp, as he calls it; it works to deliver knowledge by stimulating the thirst for it" (106). Stephens, Ann Righter and other Bacon critics have noted that Bacon considered the aphorism the proper mode for the represen-

tation of truth. "The aphorism," he writes in the Advancement of Learning is "knowledge broken" (Selected Writings, 304-306). As Stephens has said,

> [The aphorism] is employed to lead the reader from the confines of his own mental world into a new experience of invention. Though the risk of confusing the reader is present, the aphorism compels the more curious and competent readers to unravel the mystery and fill in the gaps. Since knowledge exists only in portions and fragments, an abrupt and bare style of delivery is most appropriate to it.(121)

In all his efforts, philosophical, rhetorical, and scientific, Bacon was at war with complacency and Scholastic dogmatism. Anne Righter analyzes the motive behind his work:

> A double impulse, a need to discover and establish Truth on the one hand, and to prevent thought from settling and assuming a fixed form on the other, lies at the heart of all of Bacon's work.(24)

Science, especially the inductive method, is for Bacon the antidote to mindless received ideas and bigoted thought. And aphorisms are the substance of science:

> For aphorisms, except they should be ridiculous cannot be made but of the pith and heart of sciences; for discourse of illustration is cut off; recitals of examples are cut off; discourse of order and connexion is cut off; descriptions of practice are cut off. So there remaineth nothing to fill the aphorisms but some good quality of observation. (Selected Writings 126)

The readers of aphorisms must take an active role in the making of meaning and the discovery of truth. Bacon

believed that heavily adorned prose was the enemy of truth seeking. As Stephens has noted, Ciceronian prose is most persuasive to general audiences who are lulled by the "false sense of completion" which such prose induces. This effect gives readers a fradulent notion of their reasoning powers as well as those of the writer (105). So, too, believed the first anti-Ciceronians, the followers of Seneca.

In The Senecan Amble, George Williamson makes connections between the "fragmented," curt style of Seneca and that of Bacon. He also observes that Hippocrates, whose science was as "new" in his time as was Bacon's in the seventeenth century, made use of the aphorism as his characteristic form of discourse. "The aphoristic style was popular with the early medical writers, who apparently owed something to the oracular manner of Heraclitus" (178). Bacon's view of scientific discourse "confirms," believes Williamson, "his sympathy with pre-Socratic times, and anticipates the Royal Society" (178). Williamson believes that "Bacon thought aphorisms not only the best way to reduce wisdom to precept, but the proper mode for works that did not pretend to finality" (180).

There are two sorts of aphorisms in Bacon's works: the bare, unadorned kind found in his scientific writing and the more figurative concrete type found in the essay. Stephens analyzes the two categories in this way:

> Within the philosophical works, the aphoristic method seems to be dictated not by the audience, which has determined the method initially, but by the state of learning in the field under discussion. In these works, it is the form taken by the aphorism which indicate the subject's standing among the sciences. If the material is part of a well-established body of knowledge or the result of observation and experimentation, it is treated in the sparse prose of announcement. Questions of theology, ethics, literature, or other matters in which certainties rarely exist, and questions of theory, call for something more than method. They demand particular clarity of presentation and adornment, and because their substance is composed largely of abstractions, figurative language must be employed to reduce them to the simple sensuous impressions . . . most persuasive to thoughtful men.(107)

As could be expected, the modern version of aphorism used in the Baconian essay is of the latter, "concrete" form, since the subjects of essays, as they have always been, are rhetorical, the ongoing discussions of probabilities. Most of Bacon's essays begin with arresting aphorisms of the figurative sort. For example in "Of Beauty," Bacon delivers the following pronouncement:

> Virtue is like a rich stone, best plain set; and surely virtue is best in a body that is comely, though not of delicate features, and that hath rather dignity of presence than beauty of aspect; neither is it always most seen, that very beautiful persons are otherwise of great virtue; as if nature were rather busy not to err, than in labor to produce excellency; and therefore they prove accomplished, but not of great spirit, and study rather behavior than virtue.(188)

In most of Bacon's essays, aphorisms are rich blends of figurative language and classical allusion. As such, of course, they defy the pure description he set forth in the

Advancement. Nevertheless, several characteristics of the essentially barebones quality of aphoristic persuasion as defined by Bacon hold true in his essays and in those of his modern followers.

John Gross in his Introduction to The Oxford Book of Aphorisms lists several attributes of aphorisms--ancient and modern. He contrasts the aphorism with the maxim and proverb; the aphorism differs from both by having a distinctly more "subversive" character ("often it is a maxim [it] set[s] out to subvert"[vii]) and by having a more general character. Also, an aphorism, unlike the proverb, has an author. Furthermore, an aphorism, believes Gross, is "a form of literature, and a highly idiosyncratic or self-conscious form at that." An aphorism "depends for its full effect on verbal artistry, on a subtle or concentrated perfection of phrasing which can sometimes approach poetry in its intensity" (viii).

Modern practitioners of the Baconian type of aphoristic essay are known for their almost old-fashioned attention to balance, alliteration, anadiplosis and other stylistic displays. Baconian essays, still retaining the imprint of Bacon's imitation of Tacitus, are more serious in tone than the Montaignesque type--although, as I have noted, the underlying persuasive point of a reflective, Montaignesque essay may be very serious indeed. We find most Baconian essays in political commentary and literary criticism.

Unlike some commentators on the essay, I would argue that the "grave," authoritative personality is as important to the rhetorical success of the aphoristic essay as is the confidential, insinuating personality of the "familiar" Montaignesque essay.

A certain magisterial quality has long been associated with aphorisms (and, of course, the aphoristic essay). Aristotle's pronouncements on the use of maxims in his Rhetoric can be extended to aphorisms: "The use of maxims is suited to speakers of mature years, and to arguments on matters in which one is experienced" (1395a). W.H. Auden in The Viking Book of Aphorisms rather caustically expands on this notion of the authoritative nature of aphorism:

> Aphorisms are essentially an aristocratic genre of writing. The aphorist doesn't argue or explain, he asserts; and implicit in his assertion is a conviction that he is wiser or more intelligent than his readers. For this reason the aphorist who adopts a folksy style with "democratic" diction and grammar is a cowardly and insufferable hypocrite (v-vi).

Although the aphorism is not an argument, as Auden notes, it is often found in those essays which are most openly argumentative. In Bacon's essays, for example, an aphorism acts as a premise from which Bacon builds an argument. The same is true in many modern deliberative essays.

The Exemplum

The exemplum is associated with the familiar, Montaignesque essay. Montaigne stacks example on example in the fashion of the Renaissance. On the other hand, modern practitioners of the reflective, "familiar" essay often use only one example, as in Orwell's "A Hanging," fleshing it out in the manner of fiction and articulating the rhetorical point that the example illustrates in a calculatedly offhand manner at the end. This modern practice directly contradicts Aristotle's advice about exempla in the second book of the Rhetoric. Examples, he believes, must always follow an enthymeme. Otherwise, a speaker will need many of them to make a case, since he will be arguing inductively (2.20, pp. 148-149).

But Aristotle was talking about speeches. He had not envisioned the radical opportunities for artifice and illusion provided by an essentially written medium (Beale 90-91). Montaigne, who invented the personal sub-genre of the essay, understood the possibilities for persuasive artifice afforded by print. His use of examples was not only a shrewd deviation from straightforward Classical argument but an idiosyncratic play on the Renaissance conception of the exemplum. Renaissance exempla were descendants of Medieval homilies which were "homely" examples of Scriptural truths. The Commonplace books of the

Renaissance which were compendia of secular truths also contained examples from classical literature of these truths. As Robert D. Cottrell has written in Sexuality/-Textuality: A Study of the Fabric of Montaigne's Essays,

> In the Renaissance, there was little question that wisdom and morality were embodied in the texts of antiquity. . . . The function of an 'exemplum' is to particularize or concretize this wisdom by means of a precise illustration.(58)

Montaigne's use of the exemplum reinforced his skeptical notions about the nature of man. In his first essay, "By diverse means we arrive at the same end,"(I.1, p.3), he upsets the conventional formula of listing examples to prove a foreordained conclusion. Montaigne argues on both sides of the question with equally powerful classical examples. In the course of the essays, his use of examples becomes even trickier, so that in many, for example, "That to philosophize is to learn to die" (I. 20, p.56), the stated aphorism at the beginning is disproved by the examples he chooses.

Lino Pertile sees this "revolutionary" use of the exemplum as proof that "there is no truth for Montaigne that cannot be turned upside down" (208). Montaigne's examples are the key to his rhetorical stance, a stance adopted in one way or another by every one of his followers. His examples are drawn from anything and everything he has seen or read. In contrast, however, to many later practitioners

of the "familiar" essay, Montaigne's examples are rarely autobiographical. Steven Randall in his 1976 article "The Rhetoric of Montaigne's Self-Portrait" offers an interesting explanation for the curious impersonality of Montaigne's examples:

> Lacking evidence, it is difficult to challenge the validity of his portrait or to evaluate his own interpretation of his life. . . . [Montaigne] thus escapes in large measure one of the fundamental rhetorical difficulties of autobiography, namely the tendency of the reader to suspect that the events recounted by the autobiographer have been arbitrarily selected and presented in such a way as to confirm a predetermined pattern or judgment. Any argument from examples is open to this charge, especially when the audience has reason to doubt the speaker's integrity or the representativeness of his examples.(293-294)

Montaigne's persona looms over the huge project of the essays, but his ethos is conjured only indirectly from his examples. As Randall has noted, his statements about himself--that he is boring, scatterbrained, obsessively worried and sensitive--are disproved by the scintillating, sharp, bold quality of his thought as revealed in his essays (290). For Montaigne, then, The Essays are the largest exemplum of all--undergirding his continuing, skeptical point that all our dogmatic statements about ourselves can be contradicted.

Another skeptical play by Montaigne on the traditional fashion of preaching virtue through the examples of saintly lives is his wry offer of himself as a kind of anti-example,

anti-saint. Once again, however, the dichotomy between the "ordinary" Montaigne and his extraordinary work exemplifies Lukacs's notion of the ironic stance of the essayist whose pretense of knowing nothing masks the sermonic, rhetorical aim of his essays.

The self-deprecating pose is common in contemporary essayists as is the use of examples to overturn received wisdom. On the other hand, modern essayists differ from Montaigne in their frequent use of personal, autobiographical examples; and this is clearly an inheritance from the Romantics whose view of mankind differed sharply from Montaigne's and other Renaissance writers. A belief in individual diversity and skepticism about systematized truth are constants in the essay tradition throughout its history. Nevertheless, the notion of individual truth, that article of faith of all Romantics, is foreign not only to Renaissance writers but to some contemporary practitioners of the reflective essay as well. The confessional examples we find in the essays of Thoreau and Didion, for example, are missing in Montaigne's essays--and Tom Wolfe's and Lewis Thomas's--whose "personal" anecdotes are really rather impersonal. For the anti-Romantics, or "Baroque" essayists, to borrow Croll's term, the familiar persona which is the trademark of the Montaignesque essay is created not by the revelations of personal examples, but by conversational tone and a playful delight in overturning received opinion.

Modern Traditions of the Essay

In the following chapters I will analyze the essays of some modern followers of Bacon and Montaigne. I wish to build on the theoretical base of Beale's notion of the essay as rhetorical discourse by emphasizing the skeptical nature of the genre. The Renaissance conception of skepticism, as I have tried to show, is a constructive exploration of and argument about probabilities, the exploratory spirit that lies at the heart of rhetoric. Perhaps, rather than bemoaning our lot in living in such complicated times, as do the "Grim Sliders," we should celebrate our fortune in living in a sort of new Renaissance, in which, because the old scientific totem is overthrown, we have great freedom to pursue the eternal questions in the anti-dogmatic manner of the original humanists. When systems fail, rhetoric fills the vacuum. The popularity and influence of essays attests to the profoundly rhetorical nature of our age.

Notes

[1] See, for example, the essays of David Morse, Homi Bhabha, Allon White, and Frank Gloversmith in The Theory of Reading, ed. Frank Gloversmith (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1984).

[2] Excepting these insights, Kahn's treatment of Renaissance skepticism is tainted by a strong deconstructionist bias which leads her astray in her notions of the skeptical temper. As with Hartman, (Chapter One), the radical skepticism of this deconstructionist critic seems very dogmatic.

CHAPTER THREE

APHORIST, EXPERT, AND JUDGE: THREE BACONIAN ESSAYISTS

"Learning teaches how to carry things in suspense, without prejudice, till you resolve."

--Bacon

In this chapter I shall analyze some of the techniques of three American essayists who draw more or less distinctly from the "Baconian" tradition: George Will, Paul Fussell, and Paul Theroux. I have deliberately chosen writers whose work is not easily categorized, which, in all three cases, resides on the outskirts of what Beale terms the "reflective/exploratory" genus, the category associated with the traditional "familiar" essay. Their work, by and large, exemplifies "the distinctively modern variety of suasory reflection . . . which focuses on topics of immediate social interest and controversy, but using strategies of reflection rather than of deliberation, and conveying a distinctly personal attitude" (Beale 157).

I want to make clear that in offering these three writers as examples of modern traditions of the essay, and the three Montaignesue writers in the following chapter, I I am not attempting an overview of the entire spectrum of the form. In fact, I am only concentrating on one of

Beale's categories, the reflective/exploratory. This analysis does not include the base form of rhetoric, which is the deliberative essay, nor the informative, nor epideictic genres.

I concentrate on the reflective/exploratory essay because it is the most volatile, the most subject to invention and change. Beale notes that this type forms a bridge with poetic discourse, and because of this, the reflective essayist freely borrows from the traditions of fiction and poetry (152). I also concentrate on this form because I believe it tells us something not only about "modern traditions of the essay" but also about the Modern Tradition itself. The tendencies toward skepticism and individualism inform our age, as off-shoots of a neo-Renaissance distrust of authority. Debates on public issues and policy increasingly take the form of personal reflection. A possible reason for the predominance of the subjective is that while Aristotle envisioned for deliberation a circumscribed range of policy issues, modern deliberation quickly leads to questions about basic values and beliefs. Writers adopt a democratic stance, on apparently equal footing with their audiences. Furthermore, the pervasive use of the personal, familiar voice--and the concurrent decline of the authoritative high style writing--are byproducts, I think, of the flood of information. No longer do texts have

the same authority they enjoyed in the past when there were fewer publications and "the news" was difficult to obtain.

The works of the three essayists I examine in this chapter are less personal than those of the writers in the fourth chapter. The impersonality of Baconian essays is, of course, their hallmark, although "impersonality" is actually a less precise term for aloofness or distance which, as Booth reminds us time and again in The Rhetoric of Fiction, do not stand for an author refined out of existence. An aloof persona, who tells us little of himself and assumes a superior or expert stance, positions himself above an audience for a reason. He is the boss behind the imposing desk, and his "personality" is as important as that of the neighborly, "familiar" essayist, who pretends to be in the typing pool with us.

Will's pieces exemplify a contemporary brand of political commentary in which "the tactic . . . is not that of the deliberative but rather of the familiar essayist: not a thesis supported but a connection drawn" (Beale 281). Actually, though, political opinion lends itself to a variety of techniques. Writers can assume the roles of experts, as do Will and Edwin Yoder, for example, or of "know-nothing" neighbors, as do Calvin Trillin and Russell Baker. As in the case of most rhetorical writing, the material itself does not dictate a conventional stance by the author.

This lack of a predictable stance stems from the fact, I believe, that most readers consider politics within their own realm of knowledge. In politics, especially, people tend to assume some sort of dialectical position above mere expertise. A reflective writer such as Will who chooses a Baconian persona must soften it somewhat with self-deprecating asides and occasional "familiar" pieces. The same is not true of the more thoroughgoing deliberative essayists such as the editorialists for daily papers who write more about individual policies than moral contexts. Their expert stance is an expected convention, accepted even by readers who think they know at least as much and probably more.

Paul Fussell's book reviews represent a different sort of tradition in the reflective/exploratory sphere. Fussell's reviews are extended critical versions of a well established "de facto genre." Within Beale's model of "aims" (rhetorical, instrumental, scientific, and poetic) de facto genres are assigned the lowest, least stable position:

> The rationale of such positioning is that "de facto genre" represents a category wherein certain typical functions are associated fairly consistently with certain conventions of form and strategy; and . . . anything perceived as a conventional form is subject to metaphoric transfer--to subordination to other ends. This happens, for instance, when what appears to be a book review turns out to be an extended presentation of a counterthesis or an extended promotion of the ideas contained in the book. (23)

A de facto genre like a book review or an obituary may be stable in form, but paradoxically, because of this stability, vulnerable to appropriation by an author whose aim is more than a simple judgment about an artistic work. This theoretical notion of asymmetry confirms Lukacs's comments on the "ironic" stance of the essayist who pretends to be "just" examining "pictures and books" while he really is examining moral and aesthetic issues of much greater scope.

Nevertheless--another paradox--although the author of a book review may pretend to a lowly aim, he is bound to a loftier relationship with his audience than are writers of other sorts of essays. He must assume a voice of expertise if he is to be credible. The "expert" voice of the simple book review survives, I believe, in extended "essay reviews"--the term used more and more often in magazines and periodicals.

Beale discusses the notion of "direction"--that is, audience/author relationship--and makes the following judgment about rhetorical discourse:

> In rhetoric, the author-audience relation is dynamic and open-ended. It is not determined by convention or the exigencies of subject, nor is it fabricated; rather, it is discovered or established by a successful author and is developed or exploited as a strategy of persuasion. (99)

Although I agree on the whole, I do not think Beale's analysis takes fully into account the "exigencies" of

subjects which demand a certain assumption of superiority or expertise on the author's part if he is to be rhetorically successful. In the course of his reviews, Fussell, for example, may reveal intimate, even humiliating bits and pieces about himself, but the voice of the expert reviewer predominates nevertheless. We do not wish to read the critical comments of an ignorant person, no matter how "familiar" and engaging he appears to be.

Theroux's travel pieces are even more difficult "cases" to classify. Some travel pieces are in the Montaignesque mode and others are Baconian, while many are mixtures of familiarity and impersonality. Nevertheless, I include his travel essays in this chapter because I think Theroux's persona is consistently more ironically superior, more worldly wise, more defensive and less self-mocking than the voices in the essays I examine in the next chapter. Furthermore, the didactic, even preaching tone of the Baconian essayist is striking in Theroux's writing.

Although an essayist uses different voices at different times--George Will writes "egalitarian" pieces on his family and Calvin Trillin uses "straight" reportorial prose in his "U.S. Journal" columns, for example--on the whole, however, a consistent thread runs through a particular writer's essays which places him or her in the Baconian or Montaignesque camps. Perhaps the key is an individual

writer's temperament, but that is a subject more fit for psychoanalysis than rhetorical criticism.

A more objective index of a writer's characteristic style and stance is found in Beale's distinction between modal "stances" and modal "directions." The stances--discursive, narrative, dramatic--form a continuum of ways of establishing a conventional place-time relationship of author and reader, and certain characteristic ways of creating coherence attach to the different positions. The "directions," which can attach to any of the stances, use features of pointing to "direct" discourse in one of three ways: 1. towards the audience (affective); 2.towards the subject (objective); 3. towards the author or narrator (expressive).

One of the hallmarks of the Baconian tradition is its relative restriction of modes in comparison to the Montaignesque tradition. Baconian essays are usually discursive, whereas Montaignesque essays are mixtures and variations of all three modes. Within the discursive mode, Baconian essays are more or less objectively directed, although some essays meet the more expressive Montaignesque type halfway. This is especially true with travel essays such as Theroux's "Memories of Old Afghanistan" or "Malaysia." In the rest of the chapter I hope to show a sort of continuum of reflective expression within the Baconian type, from the relatively objective pieces of George Will to the more expressive

pieces of Fussell and Theroux, whose essays make a bridge to the lyrical essays I discuss in Chapter Four.

I. George Will, the Aphorism, and the Op-Ed Column

George F. Will's political commentary won acclaim from the beginning of his career in journalism, and such acclaim provided this relatively young man the necessary authority of an aphoristic Baconian writer. Will's essays are more reflective than most political commentary, which typically takes the short rather than the long view.

Will's philosophical stance is a product of his family background and education as well as his own temperament. Will's father, Frederick Will, was a philosophy professor at the University of Illinois at Champaign. Although steeped in an academic environment, young George was not really intellectually engaged at Trinity College in Connecticut. In an interview with David Broder, Will described himself as "a late bloomer intellectually," not interested in much "except the National League until about my senior year in college" when he was promoted from sports editor to editor of the campus newspaper (Broder 422). His parents were Democrats and Will was a liberal in his undergraduate days, co-chairing "Trinity Students for Kennedy" in 1960. After graduating from Trinity, Will enrolled in Oxford where his politics underwent a sea change. "I became," he now writes, "a thoroughly ideological capitalist":

> It was in Britain that I began to see how a state fueled by unclear ideas about egalitarianism and a sort of reflexive, trendy, intellectual anti-capitalism

> could suffocate the social energies of a country, could condemn a lot of people to a frustrating future, by stamping out, in a nation where they needed it most, social mobility. (422)

After Oxford, Will entered the Ph.D. program in political philosophy at Princeton. His hard-line politics, developed at Oxford, softened somewhat at Princeton where he increasingly began to see the need for government interference to restrain the sometimes cruel forces of a completely free-wheeling capitalism. The ideas of Leo Strauss, the University of Chicago political philosopher, greatly influenced Will's emerging philosophy of a restrained capitalism (422). After earning his Ph.D. at the age of twenty-three, Will taught political science at Michigan State and the University of Toronto.

In 1970 Will left his teaching career to join the staff of Senator Gordon Allott of Colorado. Will was one of Allott's chief speech writers. At the same time, Will began to contribute to William Buckley's National Review. When Allott lost the 1972 election, Will became the Washington editor of Buckley's magazine. He also began contributing columns to the op-ed page of the Washington Post, and in 1973 the column was syndicated. In 1974 Will began writing bi-weekly essays for Newsweek. He is also a commentator on David Brinkley's weekly television program on ABC, This Week. His rise as political commentator has been unusually

fast. With so much exposure in differing contexts, Will's views on politics and government are widely disseminated, and he is able to present and "play off" his opinions in his television appearances and columns. Will has the luxury of repetition and amplification enjoyed by few columnists since Walter Lippmann.

Will's essays are, for the most part, in the Baconian tradition: unabashedly deliberative, weighty, and baroque in style. His penchant for aphorisms--his own and others--is the distinguishing hallmark of his writing. Will won the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished political commentary in 1977, and in 1983 U.S. congressmen and senators voted him the journalist they most respected. Will's commentary won acclaim from the beginning of his career in journalism, even from liberals who disliked his neo-conservatism. The columns Will wrote in his early thirties are, on the whole, "graver" than those he writes in his mid-forties. Furthermore, the structures of these earlier columns is more clearly defined. There is more of a shotgun quality to Will's later pieces as well as a more casual tone.

Reading Will's essays in his three collections, The Pursuit of Happiness and Other Sobering Thoughts (1978), The Pursuit of Virtue and Other Tory Notions (1982), and The Morning After (1986) is interesting not only because of the content of the essays but because we can trace the metamorphosis of a persona that is consistently serious but

increasingly playful at the same time. Perhaps a youthful aphoristic writer must establish a reputation for gravity--and grow in confidence--before he can use to any great extent the traditionally self-denigrating humor of the skeptic.

In his Introduction to The Pursuit of Happiness, Will states clearly that he writes from the stance of a moralist:

> My subject is not what is secret, but what is latent, the kernel of principle and other significance that exists, recognized or not, inside events, actions, policies and manners. . . . these columns are meditations, my attempts to examine issues and events through the lens of principles that, I am confident, constitute a coherent conservative philosophy.(xv-xvi)

Will's essays are remarkable for the clear-eyed vision of the values behind government policies and cultural drifts. In this same Introduction, Will allies himself firmly with traditional periodical essayists, such as Addison, Steele, and Johnson, who also were unapologetic moralists. He is also clear about the limits of rhetorical writing ("journalism"). In his essay "On turning forty," he compares the aims of "journalism" and literature and concludes that the latter enlarges our sympathy by exposing us to "themes of ordinary life. Indeed, the older I get, the more I see the inexhaustible interestingness of the ordinary." On the other hand, journalism, believes Will, "illustrate[s] life's thorns and thistles" (PV, 378).

In Will's own thorny essays, there is a large measure of sympathy for the underdogs of our society. Will departs from more traditional conservatives in his endorsement of welfare distributed prudently by a strong central government. In Statecraft as Soulcraft, his book outlining his political philosophy, he calls for a transformation of traditional conservatism into "conservatism with a kindly face." He consistently deplores the modern version of government promoted by such diverse thinkers as Adam Smith, and James Madison, because, among other reasons, such a mechanized view of forces and counterforces results in the "devaluing of government . . . radically lowering the stature of the political vocation" ("Adam Smith," PV, 285).

The stony-hearted brokering of factions that is our present view of government results in the unleashing of an equally stony-hearted selfishness, which is the underside of the enduring American trait of individualism, believes Will; the needs of the community are seen as second to the desires of the individual. Will finds symptoms of this roughriding individualism in a number of places--from films like Billy Jack (PH, 131-134) to the public's reaction to illegal drugs:

> The inadequacy of the ethic of individualism is apparent in the fact that people tend to worry about recreational drugs only in terms of danger to users' physiologies rather than damage to the community's character.(PH, 69)

The deleterious effects of unfettered individualism is one of the touchstones of Statecraft as Soulcraft. Will pleads for a strong government which aids the efforts of individuals and groups, "small platoons," to help the luckless of society. James Neuchterlein in his 1983 article on Will and Statecraft as Soulcraft concludes that Will's support of strong government is more persuasive in his essays than in his book: "In the immediate and quotidian world of Will the columnist, his sympathies for strong government are regularly checked and restrained by his knowledge of government's habitual failures" (40). Neuchterlein's assessment of the columnist's strengths as an essayist, compared to his perception of Will's failures in the book-length Statecraft as Soulcraft, can be extended to the strengths of the essay form itself:

> It is odd that an author should be more impressive in brief essays than in a fully developed argument, but that is the situation with Will. His columns, taken together, offer a richer and more satisfactory (if less systematic) public philosophy than does his book. . . . Will's columns normally begin with discussion of a specific issue and move on from there to more general analysis. Statecraft as Soulcraft too often lacks the anchor of particularity. (39)

Regular essayists/columnists stake out certain territories for themselves, making contracts with regular readers. Audiences expect politically liberal argument from Anthony Lewis, accomodationist foreign policy interpretation

from Flora Lewis, ironic personal narrative from Russell Baker; columnists work hard to appear responsible as well as present a predictable slant. George Will produces conservative commentary from an historical, intellectual perspective. Such a niche has its dangers: because Will is associated with an intellectual high road, he may also be associated with pedantry and scholarly arrogance. Will's style is highly aphoristic, and, as I have discussed in Chapter Two, aphorisms are traditionally the province of "aristocratic," old sage personae--as well as tiresome old bores like Polonius. A recent series of "Doonesbury" cartoons by Gary Trudeau humorously exploits (and attacks) Will's reputation as a "quoter" (see appendix to this chapter). Trudeau's series ends with Will quoting, and identifying himself with, the ultimate "source."

What Trudeau ignores, of course, is that quotation was at one time also a staple of the self-denigrating, "humble" Montaignesque essayist, a remnant of the Renaissance humanist's deference to his classical reading. In contemporary essays, however, a penchant for quoting is an almost exclusive characteristic of the Baconian line of essayists with their equally pronounced characteristic of generating their own quotable aphorisms.

A sampling of Will's aphorisms--his own and others--is an excursion into the relatively exotic world of traditional

rhetorical schemes and tropes, a world that was once familiar to every grammar school child. That Will is a conscious phrase-maker, that he exploits with relish anaphora, epistrophe, chiasmus, and other traditional marks of eloquence indicates to some extent his conservative reverence for historical tradition. His comments on Winston Churchill's baroque style ("Winston Churchill: In the Region of Mass Effects," PH, 31-33), are applicable to his own as well:

> Many people found the archaisms of his rhetoric offputting. Such people--who, I wager, prefer Le Corbusier to Wren, Hemingway to Flaubert--dismiss his rhetoric as the unfortunate consequence of exposing an impressionable youth to Gibbon and Macaulay. But it was much more than the residue of others' eloquence.
>
> People who look upon history as a story of unreasonably slow progress from darkness to our current enlightenment, and hence as just a tiresome prelude to modernity, should dislike Churchill's rhetoric. In it style and substance are fused. (32)

Will often begins his essays with a self-conscious rhetorical figure. For example, his piece "The 'Ordinary' Soviet Leaders" (PV, 157-160) begins with a double example of symploce (beginning and ending a clause with the same words): "For generations, the world has been awash with potent ideas about the impotence of ideas, and theories of history that discount individuals as makers of history" (157). Will also may end his essays with an aphorism, as in the elaborately figured close of his essay "The Soft Cushion of Detente" (PV, 163-165): "Today, the Soviet regime is so

grotesquely ignorant and arrogant, so boorish and bullying, that its cruelty and recklessness may awaken Americans from their dogmatic slumber" (165). A connoisseur of rhetorical figures delights in such an interplay of anaphora (repetition of the beginning element "so"), polysyndeton (repetition of the conjunction "and") and isocolon (balance of syllables).

More often than not, however, Will favors a curt statement as a way to bring an essay to a memorable, abrupt close and to carry his point home. For example in his essay on Wayne Hays' philandering ("An Appropriations Question," PH, 226-228) he ends the essay by asking a blunt question: "The question is: does his mistress type, or doesn't she?" Or in his answer to a personal attack on his character and writing in the Soviet Literary Gazette, an attack Will milks for all its inherent flattery and unconscious humor, he ends with the title of the essay: "Sorry, Mom, but that's dialectics" (PV, 175).

Will also uses quotations as beginnings and endings, as well as liberally sprinkling them throughout his columns. The practice is an old-fashioned one, as I have discussed, and a remnant of the old humanistic practice of drawing on wise commonplaces to lend rhetorical authority as well as a fine patina of learning to essays. It is a practice much counseled in older composition books but out of fashion now. Perhaps the modern distrust of authority as well as the

pains that writers take to assume the most intimate possible persona and the premium place on "honest expression" and "finding ones own voice" account for the relative rarity of the quoting practice. At any rate, Trudeau's parody of Will's "imperious" penchant for quoting hits home in these dogmatically democratic times. From C.S. Lewis to Steven Leacock to James Joyce, the list of Will's sources for quotations is a small Bartlett's.

Aside from the traditional uses of authority, his quoting practice derives from an unabashed passion for fine phrases, and an uncommon humility (pace Trudeau), relatively rare among today's writers, in giving credit to other phrasemakers. Occasionally Will's quoting seems gratuitous and indolent,especially when he quotes less than memorable quotations by unknown "authorities." Who are Kin Hubbard? Abraham Myerson? Michael Ledeen? The list of unknowns is rather long. Perhaps this doesn't matter if the quotations are fine enough. For example, in quoting Charles Peguy, a name not likely to be recognized by the greater part of Will's audience, Will scores with a pithy, memorable phrase: "'It will never be known what acts of cowardice have been motivated by the fear of not looking sufficiently progressive'"("The 'Ordinary' Soviet Leaders," PV, 158). On the other hand, does Will really need to quote Ledeen in making a fairly obvious conclusion: "Michael Ledeen, writing in Commentary says Lacouture's recantation is part of 'the

debate among French intellectuals over the nature of communism--a debate which has now reached historic proportions" ("Shame," PV, 152). Such dependence on sources known primarily to other journalists leaves Will open to a charge of professorial pedantry as does his sometimes high-handed wielding of facts. For example, in his essay on Dole's debate with Mondale in the 1976 campaign ("Hitting Bottom," PH, 188-189), Will chides Dole for his spurious charge that all the wars in this century were "Democrat." Will sets the historical record straight, but in doing so seems a bit like an irritated history teacher scolding a class of dunces. Too much scholarly arrogance is anti-rhetorical since the larger audience of the essay--other than Dole and his advisors--may feel a sort of reflected contempt.

Usually, however, Will's writing is remarkably free of this stern pedantic tone--the persona that bedevils aphoristic essays as much as does the narcissistic narrator of many reflective, Montaignesque essays. Will subdues the preachy pedant through a variety of methods. First of all, he balances his scholarly approach which includes a substantial knowledge of political history with a deep fund of common sense. In this respect, as well as its conservative philosophy and wit, Will's writing is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century English political essayist Walter Bagehot, whom Will quotes from time to time.

(See PH, 239 and PV, 378). What Norman St John-Stevas has written of Bagehot applies also to Will:

> Common sense saved him . . . from the sterility to which his speculative, sceptical, intellect might otherwise have condemned him. . . . His uniqueness lay in this capacity to bridge the gulf between the practical and intellectual world. (Walter Bagehot 23-24)

Will's skepticism and common sense save him from sterile dogma and ingratiate him into the hearts of many doctrinaire liberals. In "The Disease of Politics," (PH, 190-193), for example, he concedes, as he often does, that conservatism lacks a fully articulated social philosophy:

> Conservatism often has been inarticulate about what to conserve, other than "free enterprise," which is institutionalized restlessness, an engine of perpetual change. But to govern is to choose one social outcome over others; to impose a collective will on processes of change. Conservatism that does not extend beyond reverence for enterprise is unphilosophic, has little to do with government and conserves little.(192)

Such commonsense criticism may irritate loyal Republicans but it enlarges Will's reputation on the whole with most readers.

Common sense lies at the base of Will's arguments. A judicious use of self-deprecation and dry wit enhances his writing and, like common sense, shields him from charges of pedantry to which his baroque style makes him vulnerable. Will's uses irony not only as rhetorical ornament and strategy; his ironic stance is the outward manifestation of

his inward skepticism as applied to modern dogmas and idols. As Martin Peretz has written in The New Republic:

> [Will] has the capacity for scorn, fueled less by malice than by an aversion to cant. That aversion, however, is not much shared these days. Cant, in fact, is the vernacular of the public discourse, the mode of politician, "feuilletoniste" and celebrity alike. . . . Even when we disagree with him, which may be less than one would think, George Will is a great and rare exception. (30)

In the next few pages, I will closely analyze several of Will's essays as a way of illustrating more completely some of his characteristic rhetorical strategies. The first essay, "The End of the Hostage Fiasco: Celebrating and 'Feeling'" (PV, 167-169) was published on February 1, 1981 and is a particularly good example of Will's essayistic skepticism and disdain for cant. Furthermore, it is a good representative of the contemporary political essay which does not argue straightforwardly but presents a set of opinions in the form of aphorism and example.

Context is of primary importance in analyzing rhetorical discourse, since rhetoric is conceived in response to specific events and experiences. The context for this essay was the outpouring of celebration at the return of the American hostages from Iran in January, 1981. People tied yellow ribbons on old oak trees and car antennae, held candlelight marches, sang patriotic songs and so on to mark the country's "victory" over the Ayatollah Khomeini. So

Will's opening sentence comes as a sort of Baconian shocker: "The movable feast of celebration about the hostages has abated a bit, so perhaps it will not seem intolerably churlish to ask what, precisely, people have been celebrating"(167). Will takes care to concede that he risks seeming "intolerably churlish" and "stone-hearted" but the hyperbole of these terms insures that his audience of reasonable people will not have such an overblown reaction to his skeptical theme.

The next paragraph contains several aphorisms piled on top of each other, including a paraphrase of Orwell's dictum on insincere language. Will's remarkable ear for judicious alliteration and balanced phrases is exemplified particularly in the second sentence: "When calamity is translated into the idiom of sport and christened a victory, when victims are called heroes and turned into props for telegenic celebrations of triumph, then it is time to recall George Orwell's axiom that the great enemy of clear language is insincerity"(168).

It is useful to examine why such rhetorical flourishes as the repetition of "when," the alliteration of "calamity" and "christened," "telegenic" and "triumph," "celebrations" and "insincerity" as well as the careful balancing of syllables in each phrase is so pleasing, and more importantly so persuasive. One of the best answers is found in Kenneth Burke's A Rhetoric of Motives; in line with his

view of rhetoric as inducing "identification," Burke recalls Longinus's notion of the "kind of elation wherein the audience feels as though it were not merely receiving, but were itself creatively participating in the poet's or speaker's assertion" (57-58). Burke's view is that "formal" rhetorical strategies exploit the potential for such participation by an audience. In the first sentence of Will paragraph, for example, we anticipate the beginning "then" of the final clause after the successive "whens" of the first two clauses. The feeling of closure is undeniable. Of course, the danger of such formal rhetorical appeals is that, as Burke writes, "Once you grasp the trend of the form, it invites participation regardless of the subject matter" (58). Baconian rhetoricians like Will induce "participation in the form" and "include a partisan statement within this same pale of assent" (59). People who dismiss old school rhetoric as a mindless study of schemes and tropes do not understand the power of "formal assent." Other examples of Will's schematic persuasion are found in the fifth, eighth, and ninth paragraphs. "A nation that confuses catharsis with the defense of its interests is a nation that cannot distinguish between attitudinizing and acting," exemplifies Will's characteristic reliance on anaphora, isocolon, and alliteration. "Love confessed to disc jockeys, like grief expressed to Merv Griffin, is however real the psychic need it nourishes, still synthetic"

is stinging in its ironic coupling of love and disc jockeys, grief and Merv Griffin. By placing such disparate and disproportionate elements in close proximity, Will is working in the tradition of moralists who constantly draw our attention to the confusion of values in society. "A nation that was built by muscle and preserved by blood is increasingly fueled by hyperbole and sustained by euphemism," writes Will as an aphoristic summary of the plight of society. It is no accident, I am sure, that "muscle and . . . blood" recall the popular song "Sixteen Tons" from the fifties, an era Will sees, perhaps, as more responsible and less "synthetic" than our own.

Will's argument proceeds from Orwell's notion of the links between insincerity and murky language. "Synthetic" feeling, the sort of mob emotion which accompanied the hostage homecoming, is the latest in a series of debasements" exemplified and exacerbated by the "inflation debasing the language." It includes "the manufacture of frivolous appetites" such as designer jeans and "an entertainment industry geared to the manufacture of the lowest moods (using bathos and titillation)."

In the analogy he draws between the hostage homecoming and the "vigil" kept by many people outside John Lennon's apartment after the singer's death, Will displays his essayistic talent for using a visual image as emblem for a larger state of mind, in this case the flower covered gate

outside the Dakota apartment building which Will describes as looking like an altar. "A pent-up yearning for public witness found release in worship of a rock star." The yearning for togetherness exemplified by the worshipful crowds at Lennon's apartment and those paying "tribute" to the hostages are symptomatic of the nation's desire to feel rather than think. To those people who justified the public's sentimental response to the hostage homecoming as a "good thing" by saying that it engendered national cohesion, Will offers another analogy as rebuttal; "So did Pearl harbor, which was not a good thing and would have been worse if America's response had been vigils and ribbons" (168).

Will drives home his point by offering another example of our society's growing penchant for feeling rather than thinking or acting. Students in the 1960s began answering questions by offering their personal "reactions" and "feelings." Will stands a quote on its head to summarize the trend: "Descarte's 'Cogito, ergo sum' . . . became 'I feel, therefore I am.'" In the final paragraph, Will refers back to his focusing event, the hostage homecoming, and offers a curt aphorism as a conclusion: "The celebrating will end when the thinking begins."

The essay is typical of many of Will's characteristic strategies--using an aphorism as a starting point, a "premise" for a suasory piece which is not a true argument but rather a series of opinions clothed in extra-logical

appeals, especially analogies and the decorous Baroque phrases of the traditional Baconian style, which draw on the power of formal assent. Typical too is Will's analysis of current events as symptomatic of the moral condition of the nation. Will works in the tradition of the skeptical essayist who uses events, objects, and people as focusing events for philosophical inquiries and who delights in running against the grain of received opinion.

In his latest collection, The Morning After, Will has chosen essays of an even less topical nature than those in the earlier collections. Also, there are many more essays of an apolitical nature on "familiar" themes such as children, heroes, and baseball. Is Will reflecting the current mania for personal expression or are these themes dearer to an older man than those related to political battles? Either way, Will's cast of mind as revealed in his writing seems more thoroughly "essayistic" than ever.

Will's mature style is "broken" in Bacon's approving definition of the aphorism as "knowledge broken." Transitions are at a minimum and readers must patch in middle terms. The effect is not one of carelessness, however, as one might say of Buckley's latter-day slapdash writing (we can believe Buckley's "boast" that he writes his columns in twenty minutes). Will moves with breakneck speed from one aphorism or quotation to another and the result is economy and elegance rather than lazy writing. One example of this

galloping aphoristic style is contained in his essay, "Conservatism and Cheerfulness: Bill Buckley at Sixty":

> Politically committed people live in constant danger of becoming politically obsessed and winding up like Gatsby, whose warped personality was the price of living too long with a single dream. The occupational hazard of political movements is terminal earnestness. Political journals often become lumps of dullness leavened only by outbursts of hysteria. What was said of Gladstone is true of them: They do not exactly lack a sense of humor, but they are not often in the mood to be amused.
>
> Furthermore, because conservatism is realism about mankind's limitation, it does not lend itself to the flattering of the species. Conservatives are healthily disposed to detect signs that the clock of time is running down and things are going to wrack and ruin. This disposition frequently gives them a certain grimness. Bill's singular achievement has been a compatible marriage between conservatism and cheerfulness.(MA, 399-400)

"Proof" for Will's premise that Buckley is a rare item--a cheerful but politically engaged conservative--is in the form of a piling up of aphorisms descriptive of political and conservative tempers. These aphorisms serve as a kind of definition of the politically committed species, genus conservative, with the antithetical description of Buckley's rare temperament placed at the end as contrasting anomaly.

A further example of induction based on an accretion of aphorisms is found in another "familiar" essay in The Morning After entitled "Sport and Civility" concerning one of Will's most frequent apolitical themes:

> In an age short on craftsmanship and long on shoddiness, anything done well--laying bricks, writing poems, playing games--deserves honor. Worked at intelligently, sport is not just compatible with academic purposes, it complements them because it involves striving for excellence, but striving governed by standards of fairness and seemliness. As the ancient Greeks understood, sport is a civic, a moral undertaking because it can teach appreciation of worthy things, such as courage and beauty. A use of the body that is strenuous yet elegant--be it ballet or basketball--can enlarge and express the spirit. Watching a great athlete is, strictly speaking, good for the soul. (109-110)

The last sentence is the crowning general proposition for a set of aphorisms which are thematically connected, although so various--skipping from college sports to the Greek conception of sport to the spiritual nourishment of sports--that the passage is close in tone to the calculated "ramblings" of the traditional Montaignesque essayist.

Nevertheless, I believe Will's place is with the Baconian essayists, and that his reflective pieces are closer to deliberative essays than the other Baconian pieces I will analyze in this chapter. To account for his place on the continuum of reflective discourse we should turn to a different sort of essay--one of the thoroughly deliberative essays that appears in Will's columns from time to time. An example of a refutation argument in the traditional sense is found in his essay "'Compassion' that Dehumanizes" (MA, 162-164). Analyzing this essay gives us an insight into Will as logician and debater, aspects of his rhetoric which are often subordinated to his philosophical ruminations.

"'Compassion' that Dehumanizes" is a classic example of values deliberation in the form of a refutation argument. Will is answering the charges of two other columnists, Carl Rowan and Ray Jenkins, that he has been mean-spirited and inconsistent in an earlier column. This column concerned a television documemtary by Bill Moyers on the troubled black family. Will, as he often does after encountering a book, movie or television show that he finds interesting, summarized the program for his readers and elaborated on one aspect of it--the case of a young black man named Timothy, the unmarried father of six children. (See "Beyond Civil Rights," MA, 160-162). Will sees Timothy as a "paradigm of those persons whose sexual irresponsibility produces misery but who feels (sic.) little of the guilt that changes behavior" (163).

Jenkins and Rowan subsequently accused Will of a double standard; he is compassionate about his son Jonathan who suffers from Down's Syndrome, but he is harsh in his denunciation of another "handicapped" person. Will uses Jenkins' and Rowan's argument against them by stating that they "buttress my argument with their objections to it" (163).

Will rejects the standard by which Rowan and Jenkins judge his sympathy to the black under-class. "Ameliorative programs are necessary but are doomed to be overwhelmed if the family, the primary value-generating institution,

collapses" (162). He repeats his blunt judgment from the earlier column: "I say again: The Timothys are more of a menace to black progress than the Bull Connors were because only political will was required to remove the Connors. I now add: Another menace to black progress is the 'compassionate' portrayal of such black men as utterly passive victims, as no more to be judged than infants--as less than men" (164).

Thus Will redefines Jenkins' and Rowan's position as condescending rather than compassionate. His definition of "personhood" is that its "essence . . . is an irreducible element of responsibility for one's choices and deeds" (163). He implies that by holding a person like Timothy to this standard, he is paying him the respect of judging him as a man, and by extension Rowan and Jenkins do not pay him this respect.

He also rejects the other columnists' comparison of a "genetic defect" like Down's syndrome to the environmental misfortune of being raised in the ghetto. Furthermore, he rebuts Rowan's characterization of the twenty-six year old Timothy as "another handicapped youngster, a ghetto lad" (163). Will compares Rowan's irresponsible use of "youngster" and "lad" to the demeaning use of "boy" to describe adult black males.

In the fashion of classical argument, Will concedes something: "Timothy, having grown up in a social setting of

material deprivation and moral underdevelopment and narrow horizons, is indeed somewhat a product--a victim, if you prefer--of bad circumstances" (163). Nevertheless, he refutes Rowan's and Jenkins' implied definition of Timothy as helpless. Using the topic of cause and effect, Will postulates that by "thinking of him, and telling him to think of himself, as just as much a 'victim of fate' and 'handicapped' as a child with a retarding genetic defect," people like Rowan and Jenkins do no service to "the thinking of whites and the self-esteem of blacks" (163).

Will's final argument is based on the comparison of his son Jonathan with Timothy. Although he rejects Rowan's and Jenkins' attempt to define Timothy's and Jonathan's disabilities in the same category, he does not reject the comparison completely: if one accepts his premise that "personhood" is defined by the ability to be responsible in "making moral choices," then Jonathan too is defined as a person and must be held to that standard. The implication, of course, is that Timothy, who is not mentally deficient, is certainly as or more accountable than Jonathan.

Will's conclusion is in the form of a warning aphorism which summarizes his argument: "Black Americans should be spared the condescending 'compassion' that portrays irresponsible black men as not really responsible because they are not really men" (164). Will manages to deflect the charge of lack of compassion by redefining Rowan's and

Jenkins' "advertised 'compassion'" as a cruel form of dehumanization. He is so successful in this essay because he argues logically about an issue which could easily have evoked a personal, irrational response. Rowan's and Jenkins took the low road of an ad hominem argument in bringing Will's son's disability into the argument, and Will wisely refused to argue in kind. When he quotes Rowan's characterization of his (Will's) argument as "meanness and ignorance," he uses irony as defense: "the light touch is not Carl's specialty," another example of arguing to the man, certainly, but forgivable for its admirable restraint and understatement under the circumstances.

II. Paul Fussell, the Expert Voice and the Review/Essay

In contrast to George Will's elaborate style, Paul Fussell's seems studiedly unschematic. He makes pronouncements, but these do not announce themselves in the mnemonic symmetries and repetitions of true aphorisms. Nevertheless, as with the case of Will's rhetoric, Fussell often couches the judgments in his review/essays in the clear, don't-argue-with-me dictates of the Baconian essayist. Consider, for example, this explanatory paragraph in the "Preface" to The Boy Scout Handbook, his collection of essays:

> I am persuaded by the performance of George Orwell that literary, cultural, social, ethical, and political commentary can be virtually the same thing, and I am persuaded that the audience for each one is in the nature of things the audience for the others. I have rejected the notion that readers of literary criticism must be learned in mathematics, linguistics, computer science, and analytic philosophy: I have expected them to be interested only in human nature as revealed in human behavior. I have rejected likewise the notion that criticism demands the masquerade of solemnity. In the literary pieces I have tried to understand literature very broadly, assuming that regardless of its social status or intellectual pretensions a thing is literature if it's worth reading more than a couple of times for illumination or pleasure. (vii)

Fussell's pluralistic notion of "literature" squares with his own evolution as a writer who has immigrated from the island of the scholarly elite to the rhetorical mainland. He has been an academic since 1951 when he began teaching at Connecticut College. Currently Donald T. Regan Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania,

Fussell is best known to the general public for his The Great War and Modern Memory (1975), a study of World War I literature and its connections with mythic patterns. Before Great War Fussell wrote scholarly books on poetic theory and eighteenth-century literature. He sold no more than 8,000 copies of these works. Finally, he said in an interview in Publisher's Weekly, "I got tired of writing what I was supposed to write. I felt I was repeating myself and could have gone on for years shifting the pieces around" (7). Great War was generally acclaimed and sold 40,000 copies. "This sudden discovery that I could write for the layman was amazing. I only regretted that I got to be so old before discovering it" (7). Since Great War's publication, Fussell has written several other successful "general audience" books: a study of travel writing between World War I and II entitled Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars (1980) and a book on the "invisible" American class system, Class (1983).

In these books Fussell makes ingenious connections between cultural artifacts and the zeitgeist which informs and is informed by them: from the poems of the English aristocrat soldiers in World War I to the outsized TV in a "high-prole" living room. In short, Fussell makes the kinds of unprovable, provocative connections between matter and spirit which characterize essayistic writing.

Fussell's academic area is eighteenth-century English literature, especially the Augustan Age, and it is not too presumptuous to suppose that his concentration on this age of public discourse has influenced his own desire to write for a wider audience (as well as the promise of increased sales, of course). In discussing his critical interests with Publisher's Weekly, Fussell declares that he is

> interested in writing that most people don't regard as literature, writing that's not ostentatiously artistic--war memoirs, autobiographies, travel books, of course, even college catalogs. Anything that has a delusive effect on the reader is literature and ought to be of interest to critics. What literature does, after all, is to plant us in a different, credible environment. (7-8)

Like many professors of literature, Fussell's own writing style exhibits characteristics of the age he studies: he is often arch, ironic, and decorous. In his scholarly work The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism, Fussell discusses the reactionary impulse which drove the Augustan writers who preferred to look backward to the seventeenth century rather than to join in the celebration of progress. "Their rhetorical careers," believes Fussell, "conduct a more or less constant warfare with the 'official' assumptions of their age, assumptions held by most of their contemporaries" (20). Fussell's work, too, reveals a deep vein of skepticism about beaming progress.

Fussell is a prolific writer of essays, which he contributes to such "elite" general audience magazines as Harper's and The New Republic. He also writes reviews and essays for Encounter, Virginia Quarterly Review, Partisan Review, and other publications. His audience, judging by the subjects he chooses, is an educated one though not necessarily an academic one. His book reviews, which are the subject of this analysis, are pitched to people with a good deal of literary knowledge and presuppose a readership interested in new books on William Carlos Williams or Graham Greene or Walt Whitman, for example.

Fussell's assessment of books on literary topics is in a context of his own specialized training. Because of the expert knowledge he brings to these review/essays, they must be classified with the impersonal Baconian tradition which rests on a relation of inequality between author and audience, despite Fussell's rather populist stance in his "Preface." Reviewing, for example, Vladimir Nabakov's Notes on Prosody, he writes:

> It is the whimsicality of Nabokov's approach to poetic technique, his constant pursuit of the outre, his late-romantic impressionism and idiosyncrasy, that finally are the most striking things about this little volume. He has always enjoyed parody, and what we have here is like a parody of an academic dissertation or a textbook. The genre he is working in seems close to that of Pound's ABC of Reading, but if in Pound's work we catch the tones of an angry midwestern Populist of the late nineteenth century, Nabokov's spiritual ancestry goes even further back, extending through

Lewis Carroll and Thomas Love Peacock to Laurence Sterne himself. (94-95)

I quoted this passage at some length because it exemplifies many of the characteristics of Fussell's reviews. He is able to provide a good deal of help to readers in placing works in an historical literary context ("late romantic impressionism and idiosyncrasy," "Nabokov's spiritual ancestry," analogy with Pound) as well as in the context of an individual author's oeuvre (Nabokov's "whimsicality" and enjoyment of parody). Even more striking is Fussell's ability to provide social commentary as well as literary evaluations. This is the primary characteristic which squarely places his reviews in the essay tradition of social criticism. In the section of The Boy Scout Handbook entitled "Hazards of Literature," Fussell "uses" literary works to examine cultural trends. In "The Purging of Penrod," for example, he compares the original version of Tarkington's "good bad book" with the 1965 edition as a way of illustrating the prissy attempts of modern editors to expurgate what they see as potentially "offensive" passages from older books and in so doing destroy not only much of the original pleasure and meaning but commit worse offenses themselves.

In the essay, "Smut-Hunting in Pretoria," Fussell deals with another sort of nasty nice censorship--the "Publications Act" in South Africa, which has banned not

only The Joy of Sex and various "sexual aids" but The Portable Mark Twain, Down and Out in Paris and London, To Hell and Back, A Streetcar Named Desire, and The Road to Xanadu. Analyzing "this bizarre situation" (71), Fussell reaches some conclusions about the Afrikaners:

> Sitting on the time bomb of revolutionary racial violence, the heirs of the Dutch pioneers continue worrying about the threat of vibrators and outre sexual images, devoting that energy to literal-minded acts of classification that could be spent on social reform before it is too late.(78)

Fussell's eye for concrete detail as symptomatic of a larger moral condition is the stock in trade of essayists, a skill we have already seen exemplified in Will's writing. It is a technique which originated in poetic discourse and is a link between reflective/exploratory essays and fiction.

Fussell is clear in his definition of what he conceives the book review to be. In his essay "Being Reviewed" (BSH 101-113), he writes:

> Authors of some rhetorical sophistication know that a reviewer has an obligation that goes beyond deposing accurately and justly on the contents and value of the book in hand; he has an obligation to be interesting, which means, variously, funny, dramatic, significant, outraged, or winning. The reviewer is writing an essay, and the book in question is only one element of his material.(107)

Fussell not only exemplifies the rhetorical temper in his own writing but argues for more of it in literary discourse. For example, in an essay/review of several books on Williams

("William Carlos Williams and His Problems" BSH, 30-36), Fussell extends the review to include his own analysis of Williams's shortcomings, chief of which is the self-reflexiveness of the imagists:

> An old-fashioned way of diagnosing what has gone wrong is to say that he has neglected rhetoric, and that neglect haunts much later poetry inspired by Williams's example. Poetry, say, like Charles Olson's, where the subject very seldom attains the form of the publicly available.(34)

Fussell understands the contemporary phenomenon of the reading public's official homage to poetry and fiction and its secret devotion to rhetorical discourse. He introduces his analysis of some works of hybrid novels ("Some Truth about the War" BSH,197-201), with the following pronouncement:

> I think critics and literary historians of the next century are going to patronize us no end. I think they will stigmatize us as canting phonies. For they are bound to perceive that regardless of the class prestige we publicly assign poetry and fiction, our hearts are elsewhere. They will see that our most dearly loved literary forms are really memoir, biography, and popular historiography. These we manage best, with the result that most readers curious about the contours of contemporary experience go not to fiction but to works like memoirs, biographies, topographical books, books trying to explain Hitler and the bunker crowd, popular historical works synthesized from other popular historical works, books conveying truths--or at least frissons--about Auschwitz and Vietnam and the prison system and the black predicament, books by Mailer and Tom Wolfe and Anne Frank and Joan Didion and Philip Caputo and Gloria Emerson and Malcolm X.(197)

In a scorching attack on Graham Greene, he lists "impressive

managers of the English sentence," . . . "Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Christopher Isherwood, Gore Vidal, Tom Wolfe"-- a list which seems dominated by writers who do not neglect rhetoric.

Fussell's own attentive rhetoric as displayed in his essays is distinguished by several characteristics, most of which relate to his Baconian persona: 1. an acerbic tone; 2. ironic distance; 3. irreverence and skepticism; 4. aphoristic pronouncement; 5. an aura of expertise and instruction; 6. some self-reference but remarkably little self-deprecation. His air of hauteur rankles some critics, and, one suspects, some readers as well--a vocational hazard of the Baconian essayist. Michael Gorra, for example, writing in the Nov. 27, 1982 issue of The Nation, criticizes Fussells's "sarcasm" and flippancy and sees a certain narrowness in his interests:

> A loathing for modern life as embodied in shopping malls is by now a sentimental cliche, and one to which Fussell stoops with tedious regularly. . . . Fussell's enthusiasms are so strong that he sometimes presents a narrow and misleading view of his subjects.(566)

Unlike Gorra, I believe that Fussell's "strong enthusiasms" are a function of his rhetorical bent rather than a mean-tempered narrowness. I will analyze a Fussell review in the next few pages to show in some detail how he uses an

ironic voice not only to criticize but to form a bond with his readers.

In "Literary Biography and Its Pitfalls" (BSH 79-88) Fussell's ostensible subjects are two books: Samuel Schoenbaum's Shakespeare's Lives and William B. Ober's Boswell's Clap and Other Essays: Medical Analyses of Literary Men's Afflictions. His larger subjects are literary biography and scholarly writing in general. Fussell's pairing of these two reviews conveniently allows him to structure an essay which examines first an exemplary scholarly book, Schoenbaum's, and second an amateurish failure, Ober's.

Fussell begins his essay with an extended aphorism which introduces the subject of Schoenbaum's book and foreshadows his analysis of what he sees as Ober's fatal weakness as a literary biographer:

> The problem for any biographer of an imaginative writer is that writers pursue their mystery by telling great resounding inventions, or lies. The more important of these are called novels, plays, and poems; the less important, letters, prefaces, memoirs, journals, and diaries, and we can add essays and travel books as well. When an amateur or a literalist gets hold of any of these and, avid to write a biography of their author, pores over them with care, look out.(79)

Fussell ends the essay with another summarizing aphorism which encapsulates his notion of good literary scholarship, an ideal met in Schoenbaum's writing and missed in Ober's:

> Schoenbaum's book is a model for literary scholarship, and by that I mean that in addition to being learned and sparsely annotated it is frank, unpretentious, skeptical, ironic, and vastly amusing, with not a single dull page among its 838. Nor has Schoenbaum repressed his personality in the interests of either pseudo-objectivity or "good taste."(84)

Fussell's departure from straight summary to general ruminations on the ideal these books raise in his own mind is the means by which he transforms the plain review, the de facto genre, into an essay.

His insistence on personal expression is another key to the characteristically essayistic quality of his review writing. He asserts in this review that great scholarly writing proceeds from covert personal motives, citing Northrop Frye's Fearful Symmetry and F.O. Matthiessen's American Renaissance as examples. His desire to appeal to a larger rhetorical audience than an academic one is exemplified in this passage in his expressed disdain for most academic writing: "Like all good scholarly books about literature--and there aren't many--Schoenbaum's is something more than it seems" (80).

Although his aphorisms are more rambling and less decorous than Will's, Fussell knows the mechanics of inducing formal assent and exploits the compelling nature of such techniques as balance, repetition, and alliteration in his pronouncements. In this essay, for example, he muses:

> [The] assumed simple one-to-one correspondence between

> the non-literary identity of the author and his management of conventional symbols on a page is a superstition which has entered Shakespearean biography everywhere, and it would be interesting to launch a deep inquiry into why most human beings seem to require this belief--is it to persuade themselves that in real life duplicity is as rare? (82)

The aphoristic question comes at the end, using the case of Shakespearean biography as a starting point. We barely notice the repetition of sibilants ("is," "persuade," "themselves," "duplicity," "is," "as"). The careful balance of syllables in the aphorism is more obvious. "Is it to persuade themselves" is in symmetrical opposition to "duplicity is as rare" connected by four blunt monosyllables.

Clearly, however, Fussell's aphorisms are not as self-consciously crafted as Will's. My placing him among the Baconian reflective writers is predicated more on his didactic persona than his polished aphorisms. A frequent ingredient of the professorial voice used by a Baconian essayist is irony--a more concentrated form than the smiling, diluted version of the Montaignesque writer. In this essay/review, for example, Fussell's persona is clearly that of the literary expert disdainful of the "quackery" he sees in some literary biography.

His academic training lies behind his instructive classification of Shakespeare's Lives:

> Schoenbaum's book seems to be a history of Shakespeare

> idolatry and a disclosure of the pitfalls awaiting those who try to write literary biography without a grown-up's sense of evidence. But actually it is a satire which uses "scholarship" only as its medium, the way a poet uses metaphor and cadence and a painter line and color. In the early eighteenth century, before there was such a thing as "English scholarship," it would have taken the form of Swift's "Tale of a Tub." (80)

Because readers of the Baconian essay expect writers like Fussell to assume the podium as expert, they are also willing to accept and indeed enjoy a large measure of vitriolic, unsmiling irony as a concomitant characteristic of the instructive voice. A Montaignesque writer with such an acid tongue would probably be seen as violating his contract with readers expecting amiability. In this essay, for example, Fussell as expert exposes Ober as an amateur ignoramus:

> [Dr. Ober's] most common technique for getting things wrong is to assume that works of fiction, including poems, constitute all-but-direct autobiographical registrations. Thus Lord Rochester is said to have "painted directly from life" in his poem "The Imperfect Enjoyment," actually a standard, traditional late-seventeenth-century comic-porno complaint about premature ejaculation.(86)

Interestingly enough, his more biting pronouncements are couched in figures characteristic of the Augustan satirists--isocolon, antithesis, and anti-climax. "Not all Dr. Ober's essays are ridiculous," he writes. "Some are

pointless" --delivering his anti-climax with a hard right punch. In the last paragraph of the essay, Fussell carefully balances the grammatical and rhythmic elements in his sentences to harness the power of formal assent and knock out once and for all the unfortunate Ober:

> Dr. Ober likes to drop names like Xenophon and Mozart and Pirandello to show that despite his barbarous diction and insecure grammar and clumsy sentences and pretentious jargon he's really a man of broad "culture," not just the hick technologist we took him for. . . . I'm ready to believe that Dr. Ober is an able pathologist, but as a perceiver of what writers do, and as an interpreter of literature, he's a quack.(88)

The style here is rather elaborately baroque. The polysyndeton of the beginning part of the first sentence is juxtaposed against the clipped, brutal "hick technologist" of the second. In the same way, the polysyllables of the clauses of the last section--"able pathologist," "perceiver of what writers do," "interpreter of literature"--are set against the curt "quack" of the last final clause.

How does Fussell get by with so much vitriol? How does he ameliorate the harshness of the critic-persona while going full tilt against the Dr. Obers he despises? In this essay, he attempts to ingratiate himself with his readers by establishing certain bonds. The first is the collaborative bond of irony. Wayne Booth discusses the "secret communion, collusion, and collaboration" that irony builds (Rhetoric of Fiction, 304). Although Booth discusses this notion in the

context of the "unreliable narrator" who misses the point that the author and reader, with their superior information, are able to grasp easily, the idea of collaboration extends to the author and reader of a review such as Fussell's which mocks the ignorance of a writer who does not have the "superior information" of the knowledgeable reviewer, the "information" the reviewer tactfully grants the reader as well.

Furthermore, in the course of this essay, Fussell rather unexpectedly introduces a personal exemplum:

> As a representative of a profession which for ten years has been stumped to diagnose a mild tropical disease I picked up somewhere in the Near East, even with my person and its effluents available for empirical scrutiny, [Dr. Ober] proposes to diagnose and interpret the ailments, or causes of death, of a number of prominent wits and authors running all the way back to Socrates . . ..(85)

The effect of such a sudden switching to the narrative mode is an injection of warmth and irreverence, the light touch of the Montaignesque writer. Fussell exploits the bond that the personal voice creates between author and audience at the beginning of his harsh attack on Ober. We too may have been frustrated by medical ignorance. We too may have sometimes resented the arrogance of know-it-all specialists. In fact, Fussell cashes in on the secret resentment that the laity have for professionals. "We," he implies, appealing to his readers' pride, define doctors not as intimidating

experts but as "hick technologists." The bonds he forges with irony, personality, and a shared sense of injury act as buffers against the harshness of his attacks in this essay.

Fussell's review of Schoenbaum's and Ober's books is a concrete departure point for his own thesis about the prerequisites for writing good literary biography, and these prerequisites are moral as well as aesthetic: candor, skepticism, and irony. Fussell's critical pieces are wide nets which extend the de facto genre of the book review into the deeper rhetorical waters of the essay.

By way of comparison, it is useful to examine one of Fussell's more personal essays contained in this collection. In "My War" (253-272), Fussell tries to reconstruct the genesis of the "ironical" nature we see in his essay-reviews. Fussell's explanation is that "my war [World War II] is virtually synonymous with my life" (254), and--only half in jest--that the persona in his reviews is really "a pissed-off infantryman, disguised as a literary and cultural commentator" (254).

One of the standards for judging a Montaignesque essay is the same as that for judging lyric poetry--the extent to which the writer can evoke a mood or experience. In the case of a reflective essay, the rhetorical success of the piece depends on this ability. It is fair then to ask if Fussell succeeds in engaging us in his experience so that

the ironical "flip" side to his nature is explained and vindicated.

"My War" is a successful apology, and the instruments that Fussell uses to achieve his end are those of the Montaignesque tradition: self-deprecating comedy, emblematic exempla, and skeptical honesty. Paradoxically, Fussell's ability to construct a defense in the softer, confessional mode of the Montaignesque writer may give him more credence with some readers in his natural sub-genre, the "impersonal" review/essay. Furthermore, some of the machinery that Fussell uses in his typical critical reviews is in evidence in this different sort of essay, particularly the superior position he occupies in relationship to his subject--in this case, his younger self.

The first section of "My War" begins with a comic/pathetic account of Fussell's haphazard entrance into the army as an infantryman. In the manner of Thurber's persona in "University Days," the young Fussell's decision to take R.O.T.C. in college was based purely on practical, short-term considerations: he could substitute military training for gym. Fussell was unathletic and valued his privacy; he was "fat and flabby, with feminine tits and a big behind" (254) and dreaded especially the communal showers of gym. The first irony of his military life was dramatic. He did not foresee that R.O.T.C. could lead him to a life of exhausting physical exertion and complete lack of privacy.

Other ironies came on thick and fast. Fussell's skeptical eye sees the undeniable discipline and heroism of the Germans, as well as their irrational willingness to die. "It was my first experience of the profoundly irrational element, and it made ridiculous all talk of plans and preparations for the future and goodwill and intelligent arrangements" (259). Central to Fussell's conversion to irony and skepticism is the emblem of the first dead Germans he saw in France:

> If darkness had hidden them from us, dawn disclosed them with open eyes and greenish-white faces like marble, still clutching their rifles and machine-pistols in their seventeen-year-old hands, fixed where they had fallen. (For the first time I understood the German phrase for the war-dead: **die Gefallenen.**) Michelangelo could have made something beautiful out of these forms, in the Dying Gaul tradition, and I was startled to find that in a way I couldn't understand, at first they struck me as beautiful. But after a moment, no feeling but shock and horror. My adolescent illusions, largely intact to that moment, fell away all at once, and I suddenly knew I was not and never would be in a world that was reasonable or just. The scene was less apocalyptic than shabbily ironic: it sorted so ill with modern popular assumptions about the idea of progress and attendant improvements in public health, social welfare, and social justice. To transform guiltless boys into cold marble after passing them through unbearable fear and humiliation and pain and contempt seemed to do them an interesting injustice. I decided to ponder these things. (257-258)

Fussell's gifts as a writer, his ear for the rhythms and nuances of language enable him to evoke and recreate the experience--its horror, deadly repetitions, and youthful bravado: "After that, one day was much like another: attack

at dawn, run and fall and crawl and sweat and worry and shoot and be shot at and cower from mortar shells, always keeping up a jaunty carriage in front of one's platoon; and at night, "consolidate" the objective, usually another hill, sometimes a small town, and plan the attack for the next morning" (258).

The mood of "My War" is reminiscent of Orwell's Homage to Catalonia, in which battle is viewed with an extraordinary lack of cant and self-glorification. Fussell, like Orwell, is wounded and like Orwell refuses to view himself as a hero. In fact, Fussell explains that his wound came at the end of a day of "cowardice," as he attempted to stay behind his men and was "severely rebuked by a sharp-eyed lieutenant-colonel who threatened court martial if I didn't pull myself together" (261). At the hospital, Fussell "did what I'd wanted to do for months. I cried, noisily and publicly, and for hours. I was the scandal of the ward" (262). Again, he uses polysyndeton to recreate the rush of events and emotions:

> I must have cried because I felt that there, out of "combat," tears were licensed. I was crying because I was ashamed and because I'd let my men be killed and because my sergeant had been killed and because I recognized as never before that he might have been me and that statistically if in no other way he was me, and that I had been killed too.(262).

Fussell's unwillingness to glorify anything about the war--and indeed, to make himself out as a comic nincompoop,

even a coward, is, again reminiscent of Homage to Catalonia. In the manner of Montaignesque writers, especially the post-Romantic confessional sort, Orwell and Fussell enlist our sympathy because their confessions of lack of gallantry are in the context of scenes of undeniable horror, described skillfully by both writers. Since readers possess a secret knowledge of their own cowardice in the face of far less terrible events, they are sympathetic to the "cowardly" Fussell and Orwell--far more sympathetic, in fact, than they would be if the writers' accounts had been more vainglorious.

Fussell is even more breathtakingly candid in his "analysis" of his youthful letters. In this section of the essay, Fussell is back to his Baconian form. He begins with an aphorism: "To become disillusioned you must earlier have been illusioned." In the Baconian style, Fussell is coolly critical rather than intimately engaging; the trick, of course, is that he is employing his critical abilities to unfavorably "review" his own works. Fussell uses the third person in his analysis not only to establish a credible critical stance, but also to distance his mature persona from his younger self.

The letters, like any work, reveal the mind behind them. Fussell is as unflinching in his analysis of his youthful mind as he is, for example, in the case of the unfortunate Dr. Ober. "The writer," says Fussell, is

childish, "like a bright schoolboy seeking approval," always joking but with no real sense of humor, self-deceptive and "fatuous"--forever claiming that the war would be over soon, pretentious, less than literate, and at times displaying "unimaginative cruelty" and "genuine insensitivity."

He begins the last section of the essay with a summarizing reaction to the letters: "The only comfort I can take today in contemplating these letters is the ease with which their author can be rationalized as a stranger. Even the handwriting is not now my own" (266). The important word, of course, is "rationalized," since his readers may say that the mature Fussell retains many vestiges of this younger self. Although he could not be described as unlettered, childish or humorless, he still reveals an "unimaginative cruelty"and "genuine insensitivity" from time to time (See particularly Class). Nevertheless, his use of "rationalized" supports our view of him as an honest writer. None of us can go far enough in judging ourselves; if nothing else, a kind of survival instinct takes over at some point.

The next passage that Fussell quotes from his letters is strikingly different from the ingenuous "schoolboy" exclamations. We now can see that the youthful Fussell had more powers of observation and perception than the older Fussell has so far given him credit, and that this analytical sense lies at the base of Fussell's ability as a literary critic. In the hospital the young Fussell is able to

articulate--via the emblem of the amputees--how the grotesque and abnormal can come to seem "normal"(267). "One or two scales are beginning to fall from his eyes," comments Fussell on this passage and uses it to prove once again that the experience of the war shaped his ironic view of life.

The war not only supplied him with a world view but a profession. He discovers he can "explain things" and so is fitted for teaching. That he pursued literature was not only a function of his own interests but a reflection of a kind of faith, a "quasi-religious obligation" of many of his generation:

> Thousands of veterans swarmed to graduate schools to study literature, persuaded that poetry and prose could save the world, or at least help wash away some of the intellectual shame of the years we'd been through.(268)

And Fussell and his fellow veterans retained a strong sense of hierarchy. His description of his habitual categorizing of T.A.'s, instructors, assistant professors as analogous army personnel is a funny passage which contrasts with the darkness of the rest of the essay. By closing the essay in this way, Fussell has assumed his familiar role as Baconian explicator and critic.

His conclusion is a summary of the "code" of the World War II veteran of the line who possess:

> a special empirical knowledge, a feeling of a mysterious shared ironic awareness manifesting itself in an instinctive skepticism about pretension, publicly

> enunciated truths, the vanities of learning, and the pomp of authority.(270)

A critic of the essay will notice that these "manifestations" are also characteristics of the skeptical essayist who may not have experienced a disillusioning war or have a "special empirical knowledge," but who is, nevertheless, a congenital doubter. One may wonder if Fussell might not have had this mental disposition if he had never fought in the war. Reading "My War" alongside Fussell's more impersonal literary essays may not completely "explain" his ironic bent, but does give us a glimpse of a less austere and more sympathetic persona. Nevertheless, we must still categorize him on the whole with the Baconian essayists, not only because of the preponderance of impersonal critical essays but because of the distance that he manages to keep even in this very personal essay. He is, after all, writing about a younger self, one who seems a "stranger" to him now. Unlike the Montaignesque essayist, he does not use his present shortcomings and pratfalls as "sweeteners," but only those which happened long ago. His present "expert" persona remains intact.

III. Paul Theroux, Moral Judgment, and Travel Essays

Moving further still in the direction of the Montaignesque "personal" essay, we encounter the travel writing of Paul Theroux. Classifying Theroux as a Baconian essayist is certainly arguable. First of all, many of his more interesting travel writings are books, not essays--The Great Railway Bazaar, The Old Patagonian Express, The Kingdom by the Sea--although a case could be made that these books are really essays stitched together with a common theme of geography. Second, as is the case with most writers, Theroux's pieces do not fall neatly into a stylistic category. Some of his essays such as "Sunrise with Seamonsters" and "Scenes from a Curfew" are intensely personal reminiscences presented almost entirely in the narrative or dramatic modes which characterize what Beale terms the "lyrical or experiential" essay, which is "the central or paradigmatic reflective-exploratory type, contributing most directly to the larger continuum between rhetoric and poetic" (277). Such essays are surely more akin to Montaigne's than Bacon's. Nevertheless, although Theroux's writing is often "personal," an essential didactic element is almost always present. Theroux's stance vis a vis his audience is usually a superior one. This is due, in part, to the nature of the genre of travel essays. It is also due to an inescapable, undisguised characteristic of Theroux's

writing--its clear articulation of evaluations. Rarely does he practice the careful self-deprecation of the Montaignesque writer making a point with exquisite delicacy, good humor and tact. Theroux's judgments are of sterner stuff.

Theroux was born on April 10, 1941 in Medford, Massachusetts. The family eventually included seven children, all of whom liked to write, publishing family newspapers and journals. Paul's father, a salesman, encouraged the children's writing; every night he read to the family, especially from Dickens and Whitman, often by candlelight (New York Times Magazine 65). The strong strain of romanticism which informs Theroux's travel writings can be traced in part, perhaps, to this early literary experience. We are reminded, when reading Theroux's travel essays, of Robert Stang's comments on the nineteenth-century contribution to essay literature--the nature essay--which were quoted in Chapter One (pp. 11-12). Theroux's essays, too, seem "a reaction to . . . growing urbanism, a response to the newly possible bourgeois luxury." Certainly his intended audience are "city dwellers . . . sheltered from the harsher aspects of outdoor life."

Theroux received the B.A. from the University of Maine and became a peace corps volunteer in Africa. He was "fired" in 1965 for becoming involved in an assassination plot against the President of Malawi, although Theroux's "involvement" was unwitting. Next he taught English at

Makerere University in Uganda. Here he met V.S. Naipaul, who was also on the faculty. Naipaul became Theroux's mentor, reading every word he wrote. His advice to Theroux reflected a strong rhetorical bias. In an interview with the Manchester Guardian, Theroux quoted Naipaul as telling him that "style is not very important, style's nothing really. But a book needs a reason for being written."

After the riots in Kampala in 1968, Theroux left Uganda and taught English at the University of Singapore for three years. He had written one "beginner's" novel, Waldo. In Singapore he wrote short stories and a critical appreciation of Naipaul. By the time he had left teaching for a full-time writing career, Theroux had written three more novels. He settled in England, wrote one more novel, The Black House, and embarked on an extended railway journey through Asia which resulted in The Great Railway Bazaar (1975). The book was a critical and popular hit, and is one of the rare travel books to become a bestseller. Arthur Cooper wrote in Newsweek: "Rarely have subject and sensibility been so splendidly conjoined. . . . He embarks on every project with all senses fully engaged" (72).

After the success of The Great Railway Bazaar, Theroux wrote more travel books and novels, all of which enjoyed respectable sales. In nearly all his books of travel and fiction, Theroux has explored the nature of the exotic and the feeling of alienation that travel engenders. In his

Introduction to Sunrise with Seamonsters, his collection of travel essays, Theroux describes the influence of his travels on all his work:

> I had once thought [the essays collected in the book] fell naturally into categories: Travel, Photography, Books, Writers, Family, and Trains. I realized that I habitually mixed these topics together: travel was not only an experience of space and time, but had its literary and domestic aspects as well. Travel is everything, and my way of travelling is completely personal. This is not a category--it is more like a whole way of life. And it is impossible to write about a subway without alluding to The Wasteland, or to deal with Burma without mentioning Orwell. My piece about my family--"My Extended Family"--owes a great deal to my having lived in Africa. They are all personal.(3)

This notion of the consuming experience of travelling on a writer is reflected in the encompassing, synthesizing nature of travel writing itself. As could be expected, the protean nature of travel literature has inspired the same kind of critical controversy as that which revolves around the essay, "new journalism," and other rhetorical genres. One could say that two broad categories of travel writing correspond with two kinds of journalism: straight information and essayistic journalism or "new journalism." Straight information is easily disposed of as a kind of de facto genre. People reading Fodor's, for example, are probably planning a trip to a foreign place contrasting with those who read travel "essays" who are more likely journeying inside a particular writer's head. The critical arguments which swirl around travel literature are the same that

swirl around the essay: the openness of the form, the search for "true" travel literature, and the connections of the form with other types of writing--history, geography, and letters, for example. The history of travel writing is as tangled as that of the essay, from the histories of Herodotus to the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montague to the full blown masterpiece of travel writing such as Doughty's Travels in Arabia Deserta.

Travel essays are to such travel books as short stories are to novels. They are literature of lasting value but of a briefer length and, therefore, subject to and capitalizing on the compression and distillation of brevity. Nevertheless, serious travel literature of any length is informed, I believe, by the skeptical spirit of the essay. Paul Fussell in Abroad describes travel literature as moral essays in disguise:

> It is . . . possible to consider the between-the-wars travel books as a subtle instrument of ethics, replacing such former vehicles as sermons and essays. A fact of modern publishing history is the virtual disappearance of the essay as a salable commodity (I mean the essay, not the "article"). If you want to raise a laugh in a publisher's office, enter with a manuscript collection of essays on all sorts of subjects. . . . The more we attend to what's going on in the travel book between the wars, the more we perceive that the genre is a device for getting published essays which, without the travel "menstruum" (as Coleridge would say), would appear too old-fashioned for generic credit, too reminiscent of Lamb and Stevenson and Chesterton. (204)

Fussell believes such essayistic travel writing to be almost extinct--excepting certain anomalies like Theroux's books. On the other hand, other writers, Theroux among them, see the volume of reflective travel writing as increasing. Characteristically sardonic, Theroux's belief is that this interest is probably the result of the proliferation of "mock travel" package tours in which experience is synthetically arranged (Sunrise 135).

Percy Adams, too, believes there is a surge in demand for travel literature, and he makes the interesting point that the demand is being met by writers such as V.S. Naipaul and Jonathan Raban exploiting the techniques of fiction in their travel books (Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel 284). Adams is one of several critics who link non-fiction such as travel writing with poetic discourse such as the novel. This direction in criticism is a salutary one. It is particularly appropriate in the case of travel essays which, like other reflective-exploratory pieces, occupy the DMZ between rhetorical and poetic discourse and thus yield to the analytical methods of literary criticism. When Fussell in Abroad argues for the literary merit of travel writing, he notes its connection with poetry and fiction:

> Like poems--and like any successful kind of literary performance--successful travel books effect a triumphant mediation between two different dimensions: the dimension of individual physical things, on the one

> hand, and the dimension of universal significance, on the other. . . . The travel book authenticates itself by the sanction of actualities--ships, trains, hotels, bizarre customs, odd people, crazy weather, startling architecture, curious food. At the same time it reaches in the opposite direction, most often to the generic convention that the traveling must be represented as something more than traveling, that it shall assume a meaning either metaphysical, psychological, artistic, religious, or political, but always ethical. A travel book is like a poem in giving universal significance to a local texture.(214)

This interpretation of the cosmic by the quotidian, the abstract by the concrete informs all art and, therefore, the essay. Paul Theroux's experience as a novelist serves him well as a travel essayist, especially his attention to detail and his ear for dialogue. His essay "Malaysia," for example, opens with a conversation between Theroux and "a sultan whose nickname is 'Buffles.'" Theroux captures the comic tenor of the pampered sultan's speech--very precise with no contractions and absolutely vapid in content, the peculiar mixture of correct form and no substance that we associate with high society small talk: "'A very rich American once told me that he had shot grizzly bears in Russia and elephants in Africa and tigers in India. He said that bear-meat is the best, but the second best is horse-meat. He said that. Yes!'" (106).

Theroux revels in such absurdities. In fact, the more ridiculous or uncomfortable or surprising a country is, the better Theroux likes it; or at least, this seems to be true in his earlier essays. The note of disdain that informs

Theroux's judgmental persona is reserved for the comfortable, predictable countries of the West. Theroux delights in exotic people and places with a notable lack of discrimination in this very discriminating man. In Malaysia, for example, he discovers a tree called "The Midnight Horror," which emits a noxious scent every night when its blossoms open. "Bats . . . find the odor of The Midnight Horror irresistible; they hang by the claws on their wings to the corollas and poke their noses into the flower's throat" (108). "Malaysia" is uncharacteristically good humored and ebullient; Theroux's inventory of concrete details creates a consistent picture of delight and surprise.

Usually, however, Theroux's essays are darker in tone. Details are often more gruesome than comic. His description of rats devouring a newspaper stained with human excrement at the train station in Rangoon in "Seven Burmese Days," for example, is typical of the sort of unfortunate nightmarish scene he favors. The lean, aggressive rats of Rangoon are Theroux's particular index to the state of the economy:

> The outside splashing and pools of excrement had stained the tracks and a litter of crumpled newspapers--The Working People's Daily--a bright yellow. A rat crept over to the splashed paper and nibbled then tugged, and hopped in the muck. Another splash, and the rats withdrew; they returned, gnawing.(55)

One can't help thinking that Theroux's loving attention to grotesque details originates in a desire to shock his

readers as well as the attraction of the grotesque itself. The impulse to shock, of course, is inherent in the skeptical temper--the enemy of the status quo. In Theroux's case, the sermon behind the horrific landscape in his essays is a harsh one; come to the Third World, where he locates the exotic (147), his essays exhort us, and see how illusory is the ideal, how fatuous are our ideas of paradise. "Nothing is more valuable than that irony in suggesting that the exotic is partly illusion" (147). There is a great deal of anger in Theroux's writing, directed, presumably, to the comfortable at home who have no idea of the barebones existence of the rest of the world.

This sermonizing tendency is unsoftened by the standard Montaignesque ploy of self-deprecation. Unlike Orwell's, for example, Theroux's essays do not focus on his own shortcomings to carry the message. A Theroux version of "Shooting an Elephant" would probably portray another Westerner carrying out the deed while Theroux acted as indignant observer. Theroux is more likely to judge the shortcomings of other people than his own.

There are exceptions, such as his account of his brief career as an unwitting agent of the German equivalent of the C.I.A. when he served in the Peace Corps in Africa. In "The Killing of Hastings Banda" Theroux portrays himself as a callow youth, but the inherent Montaignesque comedy is

eviscerated by Theroux's continuous effort to "justify" his stupidity:

> My readiness to say yes to favors may suggest a simplicity of mind, a fatal gullibility; but I was bored, and the daily annoyance of living in a dictatorship, which is like suffering an unhappy family in a locked house, had softened my temper to the point where anything different, lunch with a stranger, the request for an article, the challenge of a difficult task, changed that day and revived my mind. The risk was usually obvious, but it always seemed worth it--better than the tyranny of the ordinary.(69)

A writer more thoroughly at home with the humble Montaignesque persona would never undercut the technique with such a bald defense.

In "Scenes from a Curfew" (23-30), another essay stemming from Theroux's Peace Corps days in Malawi, he does portray himself in a thoroughly unflattering light, but, even here, the self-accusation inherent in the dismal scenes of selfish drinking and whoring is diluted somewhat by Theroux's detached, unemotional tone. As in an Orwell essay, the villain is a brutish political system; unlike an Orwell essay, however, it is unclear whether Theroux recognizes the depth of his own savagery. We condemn Theroux for his insensitivity, and we need more reassurance that he feels the same way. The trick in a Montaignesque essay is to engage our judgment and our sympathy, but this Theroux often fails to do. The ambivalence he stirs in his readers makes his categorization as Baconian or

Montaignesque essayist a tricky business. On the one hand, he often uses the narrative mode as well as the personal revelations of the Montaignesque essayist; on the other, he hardly ever mocks himself or seems anything but a confident, sharp-tongued expert.

It is difficult to agree with the Time reviewer who maintains that Theroux "is just as hard on himself as he is on his competitors--and the world around him" (July 1, 1985, p. 60). A good deal of the reason for Theroux's severity stems, strangely enough, from the romantic element in his travel pieces. Paul Fussell who has placed Theroux in the "post-modern tradition," analyzes the connections of travel writing in general with romance and pastoral literature. The protagonist, writes Fussell, "leaves the familiar and predictable to wander, episodically into the unfamiliar or unknown, encountering strange adventures, and finally, after travail and ordeals, returns safely" (Abroad 208). But as in the aristocratic genres of romance and pastoral, the protagonist is "almost always richer and freer than those he is among" even as he condemns the fallen state of his industrialized homeland while gazing on the innocent natives (Abroad 210).

As intrepid adventurer, Theroux travels through all the exotic places he can, including the New York subway system ("Subterranean Gothic"). He is appalled and frightened by the violent, insane, impoverished people he finds in the

subway, and compares the trip to jungle travel or a "nightmare, complete with rats" (245).

But Theroux in this instance and in other nightmarish landscapes as well is one of the lucky elite, one of the gentlemen who can view "the rustics" from the safety of his favored status. (In the subway he is accompanied by two plainclothesmen.) And, as in pastoral or romance, the "rustics," although often terrifying and certainly pitiable, seem more alive and vital than all the bland faceless comfortable people back home.

Sunrise with Seamonsters, his collection of travel essays, is arranged chronologically. The more mature travel essays at the end of the book are often variations of the subway trip; that is, Theroux travels to a known place and experiences the strange. For example, in the last essay, from which the title of the collection derives, Theroux takes a journey in a rowboat near his home on Cape Cod, and a superficially prosaic trip becomes a frightening test of his strength and courage. The tone of the last essays, too, is more thoroughly Montaignesque, more compassionate and less judgmental. Nevertheless, Theroux continues to write travel essays about standard exotic places. And when he does, as in his recent books, The Kingdom by the Sea and Sailing through China, the voice is a mixture of Theroux's Baconian and Montaignesque personas. In the next few pages I shall examine two of his mature essays from Sunrise with

Seamonsters, "Stranger on a Train: The Pleasures of Railways" and "Discovering Dingle" which exemplify this "mixed" voice in which Baconian severity predominates.

"Stranger on a Train" is another sort of hybrid, half newspaper feature and half lecture. Theroux explains in his "Afterword" that the first half was written for the London Observer in 1976 and the second half was the first Thomas Cook Travel Lecture, given in London in 1981. That the tone is so seamless can be accounted for in two possible ways: 1.Theroux's lecture was written as an essay rather than a lecture and/or 2. the two pieces were heavily edited for inclusion as one essay in the collection.

The essay is a mock-definition piece. Theroux divides train lovers into two categories: railway buffs who know all about trains but never travel and those who know nothing about trains, but like to travel on them. What is interesting, since it reflects Theroux's superior persona, is that he places himself in a singular category: someone who knows nothing about trains, like to travel on them, and has no destination: "Mine is the purest form of travel, a combination of flight and suspended animation. I enjoy getting on trains; I loathe getting off: (126).

The rest of the first part of the essay is a narrative of some of Theroux's adventures on trains including an impulsive trip through the U.S. to avoid a hurricane in New England. (The excuse, of course, is so flimsy that we get

some idea how easily Theroux can persuade himself to board a train.) He lists some of the pleasures of train travel: truthful, intimate conversation ("There is nothing I like better than putting my feet up, tearing open a can of beer and auditing a railway bore in full cry" [127]), landscape, eating at whim, "never know[ing] the ghastly jollity of group games," and debarking whenever one wants. Theroux denounces the decline of British Rail in the "characteristic frenzy of false economy" in contrast to the paradoxically more civilized journeys afforded by the trains in less progressive places such as India and Turkey.

Theroux associates "intense experiences" with train travel, and by relating some of the primal scenes he has witnessed--of courtship and death--he proves his point. His description of a boy and his dying father on the Trans-Siberian Express is a perfect miniature of the grim paradoxes that fill his essays and fiction. The boy drinks sweet champagne opposite the dying man in a

> compartment [that] had a smell of death about it, the clammy decay of a tomb; and the combination of the champagne drinker looking out at the snowy forests of Central Russia and his father dying in a narrow berth were more than I could bear. Stretcher-bearers--men wearing harnesses--appeared on the platform at Sverdlovsk; the old man's face was waxen and the boy told me in German, "I think he is dead."(129)

Theroux ends this essay with a celebration of the opportunities of train travel to fulfill "every traveller's

wish to see his route as pure, unique, and impossible for anyone else to recover" (130). The emphasis on the pleasures of travelling in the old style foreshadow the second half of the essay, which was originally a lecture. Rhetorically it is more interesting than the first part, for here Theroux addresses a group under the auspices of a travel agency (Thomas Cook) and criticizes the nature of modern "Mock Travel"--the kind of travel, in other words, arranged by a travel agency. It is a characteristically cantankerous view which also meshes with his romantic notion of the rewards of "comfortless" travel put forth again and again in other essays in the collection.

This part of the essay is also a categorization piece: travellers are divided into two groups. The first group are those who cling "to the traditional virtues of travel, the people who endure a kind of alienation and panic in foreign parts for the after-taste of having sampled new scenes" (131). Theroux's use of the words "traditional virtues" and "endure" is not accidental; it is clear in this part of the essay that he is making an ethical judgement about the kinds of travel people choose to make. The "real" travellers do not travel as a form of relaxation. Theroux's description of real travel excludes the comfortable:

> On the whole travel at its best is rather comfortless, but travel is never easy: you get very tired, you get lost, you get your feet wet, you get little co-operation, and--if it is to have any value at all--you go

> alone. Homesickness is part of this kind of travel. In these circumstances, it is possible to make interesting discoveries about oneself and one's surroundings. Travel has less to do with distance than with insight; it is, very often, a way of seeing.(131)

Those who mistake comfortable tourism for travel try to make the unfamiliar yield to the familiar. They "travel," believes Theroux, "in order to feel at home, or to have an idealized experience of home" (133).

The stern judgment in the second half of the essay presents several rhetorical problems for Theroux. Undoubtedly many of those in his lecture audience as well as readers of the expanded essay travel in just this way; furthermore, anyone who has read any of Theroux's works knows that he belongs to the "first group," the group he defines as the only ones doing anything of "value" in their solitary, uncomfortable voyages.

He tries to soften the judgment in several ways: first he makes it clear that such mock-travel is not the exclusive failing of modern bourgeois English or American tourists but is the traditional mode of travel for the rich in all centuries; second, he concedes that the two week vacations prohibit the long trips he describes as real travel; third he injects a bit of personal testimony that he too has indulged the homesick traveller's longing for a taste of home. "I found it extremely pleasant to have a cheeseburger

and a beer at the Inter-Continental Hotel in Kabul, Afghanistan" (133).

Nevertheless, these ploys are rather ineffectual in the face of Theroux's strict definitions and sneering examples of mock-travellers who complain of cold in Siberia or of having never walked anywhere in their travels. In fact, much of Theroux's travel writing (see especially The Kingdom by the Sea, and Sailing through China) is peopled by mock-travellers versus natives and one real traveller--himself. We do not believe him when he asserts that he is "not sneering at these odd forms of travel, or these homely recreations" but simply "calling attention to the phenomenon because it is so far from the traditional notion of travel as going away" (134).

The voice of the Baconian expert permeates this essay. Theroux is more interested in preaching a message than in engaging an audience. Even his attempted optimism about the silver lining on the cloud of modern tourism at the end of the essay reflects frustration, even anger--at the mock-travellers remaking the world into versions of England, American, or Japan--rather than any real hope:

> Mock-travel has produced a huge interest in clumsy, old-fashioned travel, with its disgusting food and miseries and long nights. It has also given rise to a lively interest in travel literature, and the affirmation that the world is still large and strange and, thank God, full of empty places that are nothing like home.(135)

This is Theroux at his most judgmental and least likable. Contrasting favorably is the more engaging "Discovering Dingle." The difference between the two is the padding and insulation which writing about a place provides for Theroux's judgments about travel--the difference between sermon and parable and aphorism and example. A comparison of the two essays provides a clear picture of the division between Baconian suasion and Montaignesque lyricism and serve as a transition to Chapter Four.

"Discovering Dingle" begins with an extended aphorism setting the tone for the piece; "The nearest thing to writing a novel is traveling in a strange country," declares Theroux, who proceeds to describe this Irish island with a novelist's mastery of the concrete. The rest of the aphorism sounds again Theroux's insistence on the necessity of discomfort in traveling:

> The best landscapes, apparently dense or featureless, hold surprises if they are studied patiently, in the kind of discomfort one can savor afterward. Only a fool blames his bad vacation on the rain.(140)

In the tradition of travel literature we find ourselves more and more drawn into the strange landscape and atmosphere of Dingle Island. We travel with Theroux and his family and ineluctably we reach the same conclusions that he does. Theroux "brings us along" in several ways.

First of all, his use of the narrative mode in most of the essay works the same way as in a story. We too feel the disorientation of Theroux and his family; we too become assimilated to the cold and strangeness so that when Theroux and his family visit Great Blasket Island we participate in the eerie peace they find there. In fact, the narrative verges on the dramatic--a common trick of Theroux's--with his use of the first person and dialogue. We see things through his eyes. When he describes his climb in west Dingle he switches from guidebook present tense to narrative past tense, but the effect is that of heightening the dramatic:

> Climbing west of Dingle is deceptive, a succession of false summits, each windier than the last; but from the heights of Brandon the whole peninsula is spread out like a topographical map, path and road, cove and headland. Down there was the Gallarus Oratory, like a perfect boathouse in stone to which no one risks assigning a date . . ..The coastal cliffs are genuinely frightening, the coves echoic with waves that hit the black rocks and rise--foaming, perpendicular--at the fleeing gannets; and the long Slieve Mish Mountains and every valley--thirty miles of them--are, most weirdly, without trees.(142)

Second, Theroux's gift for concrete description binds us to the narrative. The second paragraph is a series of details calculated to evoke in us the sense of paradox, comic surprise, and strangeness which Theroux believes characterizes the island. "Gloomy gypsies," "pelting rain," "uninhabited castles," "an island . . . composed entirely of rabbit droppings," "a local language that sounds like

Russian being whispered" creates the necessary mystery and sense of dislocation. Where are we? we wonder, and are surprised to find it is an island off the Old Sod.

Theroux's interspersing of dialogue, too, enriches the narration: "Sure it's a wonderful place to commit suicide" is a fey remark which captures the grim humor of the place. Theroux's ear is a good one, and many of his essays are replete with such careful transcriptions of dialogue. He is also has an uncanny ability to find the apt metaphor and analogy which enhances his essays as much as his fiction, for example: "The cries of gulls which--shrill and frantic--mimic something tragic, like a busload of schoolgirls careering off a cliff" (142), and the islands which "had the appearance of sea monsters--high backed creatures making for the open sea" (144).

Finally, Theroux depends in this essay on comparisons to carry his essayistic point--that of the surprising peace and comfort of the bleak island. First is the "remoteness" of the place and disinterest in religion "which breeds political indifference" and contrasts so sharply with the troubled Irish mainland (and other busy, more civilized places as well). The second comparison is a kind of paradox. Although the island is dangerous and solitary, it is this same danger and solitude which induce such tranquillity. At the end of the essay when Theroux and his family travel to the deserted Great Blasket Island off the coast of

Dingle, we are captivated too by the strange comfort of this solitude.

> Here on the lee side the heather was three feet thick and easy as a mattress. I lay down, and within minutes my youngest child was asleep on his stomach, his face on a cushion of fragrant heather. And the rest of the family had wandered singly to other parts of the silent island, so that when I sat up I could see them prowling alone, in detached discovery, trying--because we could not possess this strangeness--to remember it.(145)

This is a typical Theroux description emphasizing the beauty of bleakness and the companionship of solitude. The pastoral element is strong, an element Theroux recognizes: "The city-slicker's triumphant holiday is finding the right mountain-top or building a fire in the rain or recognizing the wildflowers in Dingle: foxglove, heather, bluebells" (144).

This essay is less judgmental than many of Theroux's pieces, but I still would classify it as predominately "Baconian." Like all essayists, Theroux delights in upending expectations, in shaking up the comfortable. The element of personality is more muted, however, than in a thoroughgoing Montaignesque essay. Theroux is an acute observer of concrete things which illustrate his point, a point which is usually a romantic judgment on the impossibility of the civilized life's providing the sort of tranquil solitude which allows "detached discovery."

Theroux often seems at war with the modern age, and as with his fellow essayists Fussell and Will this impatience is usually articulated in the dry tones of irony. In "Discovery Dingle," however, he simply describes an alternative landscape, enlisting his considerable skills as a narrator without much ironic commentary.

Conclusion

The Baconian essay has survived by adaptation. In this anti-authoritarian age, the stern voices of the aphorist, critic, and judge are softened by techniques they have learned from the Montaignesque essayists. In that, too, they follow in the tradition of Bacon himself, whose essays were increasingly subjective and anecdotal.

It is obvious after examining several Baconian essays that no clear category suffices. The essay's protean nature makes strict classifications contradictory and insufficient. Nevertheless, general tendencies and techniques seem to adhere around the two contrasting personas of Baconian expert and Montaignesque friend, particularly in the different "directions" of the essays. Baconian essays point more to subjects while Montaignesque essays are more directed toward the audience, or, in the case of romantic Montaignesque essays, toward the writer. Some essays are best categorized as "cross-overs," combining characteristics of both personal and impersonal writing: Theroux's travel

pieces exemplify such "transitional" essays as do the reflective science pieces of Lewis Thomas which I shall examine first in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

MYSELF I PORTRAY: THE MONTAIGNESQUE SPIRIT IN THE ESSAYS OF LEWIS THOMAS AND JOAN DIDION

> "My defects will here be read to the life, and also my natural form, as far as respect for the public has allowed. Had I been placed among those nations which are said to live still in the sweet freedom of nature's first laws, I assure you I should very gladly have portrayed myself here entire and wholly naked."
>
> --Montaigne

Although Beale believes that the tendency of all rhetorical writing is toward deliberation (120), in the case of the reflective essay there seems to be an equally strong pull in the direction of poetic discourse. Many critics have noted the similarity between the subjective, highly concentrated lyric and the essay--the most important point of congruence being the individual voice of the lyricist and essayist. As Lewis Leary has written:

> The essayist then is a personality, a man speaking his mind. His first claim to our attention is just that, but he becomes inevitably also a guide, discovering directions for the minds of other men. Next to lyric poetry, which it in some manner resembles, the essay is the most personal kind of writing, both in expression of the person who writes it and in reception by the person who reads. Its dependence on fact is less important than its revelation of point of view. Its relation to truth is only that portion of truth glimpsed by the particularized and therefore imperfect vision of the essayist. Neither historian nor philosopher, and not limited to the findings of what we call

> scholarship, the essayist is finally only essayist, not oracle. When he has disclosed something of attitude which might not have been so clearly known before, or of mood which is attractive, he has done his work. We do him disservice when we expect more. (9-10)

Leary's comments are in the sentimental tradition of the "True Essay," and, as we have seen in Chapter Three, rather useless when examining the flintier Baconian essay, which does rely a good deal on facts and from which we expect a good deal more than attitude and mood.

In the case of the Montaignesque essay, however, such a definition is enlightening, especially the connection between lyric poetry and the essay. Since criticism about the essay is notoriously sketchy and impressionistic, we will turn to criticism of lyric poetry--which is more rigorous--to provide information on the lyrical aspects of the reflective essay, especially the Montaignesque variety. This background, coupled with Beale's analysis of the type, form a platform for a closer analysis of two representatives of the Montaignesque essay: Lewis Thomas and Joan Didion.

Lyricism and the Essay

The lapidary quality of the Montaignesque essay is also a quality of the lyric poem. C. Day Lewis in The Lyric Impulse writes of the "singlemindedness" of lyricism:

> A poet writing lyric . . . must disinvolve himself from the intellectual subtleties and complex verbal plays which other kinds of verse may properly exploit

> today. He has to communicate with poetry's primal source **directly** . . .. I do not mean that his verse should be bardic, or surrealist, but that he recognize and submit to the lyric impulse, when it comes his way--the impulse to grieve or to rejoice singlemindedly, to discover images and rhythms which convey the elemental states of mind a man shares with all other living men and has in common with his remotest ancestors. (146)

Daniel Albright writes that "lyric poetry is fundamentally an attempt to approximate the condition of music" (ix). Lyricism is, he believes, a mode not a genre. This view is echoed by Beale who, unlike Kinneavy, categorizes "expressive" writing as a modal direction rather than a genre (81). The expressive direction is a subjective one--toward the author--and is characterized by use of the first person. As in the case with the other modal directions (objective and affective), it can occur in any of the modes--narrative, discursive, or dramatic.

Some critics have tried to explain the increasingly expressive direction of prose. Elizabeth Hardwick, for example, writing recently in The New York Times Book Review, explains the pervasiveness of the first person as a symptom of writers' uncertainty rather than their conceit:

> In the contemporary essay, as in contemporary fiction, the use of the first-person narrator or expositor has become so widespread it must be seen as a convenience. This is a puzzle having to do, perhaps, not with self-assertion to fill every available silence, but with modesty, a fear of presumption. In fiction a loss of movement is accepted by the choice of "I" in order to gain relief from knowing and imagining without the possibility of being there to know. That at least may

> be one of the esthetic considerations. Also, the dominance of the first-person narrator in current fiction seems to reflect uncertainty about the classical conception of character; often the contemporary psyche is not seen as a lump of traits so much as a mist of inconsistencies, flights, constant improvisations. . . . In the essay we find the intrusion of the "I" even where little is autobiographical. (44)

Beale explains the phenomenon as a historical development related to the "encroachments of science into every area of human concern" and the concurrent rise of romanticism which "placed a premium upon explorations of the self" (206). Although he believes that such an expressive orientation began with Montaigne, nevertheless, as we have seen in Chapter Two, Montaigne's intimacy is much more artifice than true confession. Perhaps the matter becomes clearer if we adopt C. Day Lewis's distinction between personal/impersonal on the one hand and subjective/objective on the other in his discussion of lyricism. He reminds us that English lyric poetry, although written in the first person, was at its conception in the Renaissance actually rather impersonal. This, he believes, was a result of "the discipline imposed upon it by music"(5). At the end of the eighteenth century, the lyric as a genre became increasingly diffused into a pervasive lyricism in all sorts of writing: "Today once could almost say there is no lyric poetry since every poem has a lyrical quality" (13). And, of course, lyricism permeated the work of the romantic essayists such as Lamb, Hazlitt, and Hunt. Day-Lewis's comments on the

nature of this lyricism are instructive: this expansion resulted "not in a different balance between the personal and the impersonal, but as a general movement from objective to subjective" (13).

With the rise of science and the flood of new information which characterize the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a subjective slant on age-old questions seems a sensible one. Hardwick suggests, however, a less fortunate aspect of increasing subjectivity which is increasing tentativeness, not in the philosophical sense of traditional skepticism, but in the sweaty-palmed indecisiveness of modern Prufrocks. Day-Lewis defines this unhappy aspect of modern writing as the cult of "sincerity," and denounces it as an altogether bad thing for lyric poetry, and we might add, for lyrical essays as well:

> Once a poet begins thinking in terms of sincerity, he lays himself open to that self-consciousness which clogs the springs of the lyric impulse. If it is more difficult now to write a simple poem in praise of nature because we know too much about nature's mechanism, so it must be more difficult to write a simple love poem:--do I **really** feel as much about her as I want to say I feel? is she **really** so beautiful, graceful, charming, mysterious, as I make her out to be? When a poet loses his nerve in this sense, begins measuring and hedging, he may write an excellent poem but it will not be a lyric. Yet, although his feelings about the beloved will illude him into believing her a nonpareil, the lyrical poet must have the courage of these illusions or else deny the power of his feelings. (21-22)

A lyric poet does not screen out "personal feelings or memories" but breaks **"through them** to the ground of their being, a ground which is the fruitful compost made by numberless human experiences of a like nature" (139).

The difference is often a matter of discipline, in poetry and essays. W. H. Auden, in his Introduction to a book of Chesterton's essays, admitted that he did not like the light, familiar essays so popular in Chesterton's day and so missed by devotees of the "true essay" in our own. Such "effortless" pieces all too often result in a kind of narcissistic display--the undisciplined hedging of the "sincere" lyricist, perhaps.

> My objection to the prose fantasia is the same as my objection to "free verse" . . . namely, that while excellent examples of both exist, they are the exception not the rule. All too often the result of the absence of any rules and restrictions, of a meter to which the poet must conform, of a definite subject to which the essayist must stick, is a repetitious and self-indulgent "show-off" of the writer's personality and stylistic mannerisms. (397)

To digress a bit, this view calls into question several current methods of college composition instruction which see the exploratory lyrical essay as a therapeutic tool in which students are invited to "free write" (Peter Elbow) or emulate a version of the Montaignesque essay which is actually foreign to the controlled original. William Zeiger, for example, writing in a recent issue of College English, describes Montaigne's motive as purely free-

wheeling and speculative. "He had no investment in winning over his audience to his opinion" (455). Actually, as many critics have recognized (see Chapter Two), Montaigne's essays were often deliberate attempts to overturn received opinion and dogma. His "subject," despite his contradictory claim, was usually something other than himself. Teaching students to write from this distorted model may be akin to teaching budding poets to write lyric poems "spontaneously," in an imitation of the self-mythologizing Shelley.

Literary critics' discussion of lyricism not only centers on the orientation of the poet/narrator to the work --the subjective direction of the lyrical mode--but the characteristic quality of the lyrical narrator's voice. Daniel Albright believes that the lyric mode has a "bardic" quality--"a certain appeal to the prehistoric, to some prelapsarian harmony prior to the division of the usual categories of things" (55). However, he also believes that, as time goes by, poets feel "increasingly estranged" from "the bard" (57). Paradoxically--even poignantly--poets redouble their efforts to "simulate" the bard, the wise, mythic voice of the lyric mode, to imitate "the aggressively antidiscursive mental and verbal habits a bard would have had a bard existed" (57).

The gulf between the lost bard and his modern simulation results in what Albright terms "lyric irony." His discussion is reminiscent of Lukacs's notion of the essayist

as egoist manque, although Albright believes that the irony of the lyric poet is unintentional, a dramatic irony perceived by his audience but unrecognized or unacknowledged by himself.

> The sudden awareness of the discrepancy between the poet as bard and the poet as fallible man results in what may be called lyric irony. . . . I suspect that the grace of many of the highfalutin lyrics in English is due to lyric irony, the consciousness of the audience that the poet is not the loud-spouting rhapsode who is the ostensible speaker of the poem, but instead is a fairly ordinary fellow who is putting on a show. (81)

As we have seen in Chapter Two, the case is quite different with the Montaignesque essayist: a serious message usually lies behind the humble, know-nothing pose of the essayist, a pose which is as carefully constructed as that of the poetic bard.

Albright's discussion of the wise voice of the lyrical poet, however, does augment our notion of the oracular, sermonic aim of the essayist--even the "regular fellow" of the Montaignesque variety--and proves once again the strong connections between the lyric and essayistic modes.

Other elements of lyrical poetry such as simplicity and brevity are also shared by the lyrical essay. However, the lyrical essayist can and often does indulge a more complicated notion of metaphor and word play than that associated with the lyric poem and proscribed by Lewis as antithetical to its essential nature--its "elemental"

nature, displaying verbal patterns and subjects "common to all men."

In fact, the opposite is often true in lyric essays. Modern essayists frequently use current events and issues as symbols of larger aspects of life. Beale has noted that although romanticism and the "belles lettres" traditions play important roles in modern reflective-exploratory essays--more important really than in modern poetry--there is an equally strong tendency for modern essayists to explore "distinct fields of subject matter" (273). Joan Didion, for example, discusses the hippies of Haight-Asbury as paradigms of a larger problem in society that is at once immediate and eternal; Lewis Thomas uses current scientific findings--such as the symbiotic relation of the medusa and the snail--to represent the heartening indications of a natural tendency to harmony that balances the more depressing aspects of Darwinian competition.

On the other hand, Day-Lewis's notion of the "single-minded" emotion of lyric poetry is often true of the lyric essay. The brevity of both forms makes such single-mindedness inevitable. Brevity also plays a part in the echoes and repetitions in lyric essays which are a counterpart to the lyric "refrain." For example, the titles of essays--unlike the titles of longer works--often act as a kind of repetition device, since title and text are always in close proximity. Even in a longer lyric essay, such as

Montaigne's "On Vanity," repetitions and variations on the theme of the essay act as a kind of mnemonic refrain.

Other Lyrical Techniques and the Lyrical Essay

Simplicity, brevity, "bardic" wisdom, and repetition are the literary techniques of the Montaignesque essay which are particularly related to the lyrical mode. Other techniques are derived from different literary traditions. Beale emphasizes the importance of three "conceptual patterns" which occur again and again in reflective-exploratory essays, and I would add, particularly in the Montaignesque, lyrical sub-genre. These are:

1. paradox; 2. enigma; 3. emblem.

The first has been discussed at some length in Cbapter Two, although we should notice once again the relationship of paradox and the skeptical spirit. Beale links paradox with contradiction and "contrary opinion," the kind of surprising "reversal" or "overturning" we often see in essays of this kind (275). An enigma is simply a puzzle or mystery, the kind of dislocation beloved by skeptics and contrarians. As Beale has written, "An essay based upon an enigma usually states or reveals the situation in which the enigma became apparent, and then it attempts to resolve it and reflect upon its significance" (276). Finally, the emblem works in essays as it does in literature, as a rich symbol which is at once memorable itself and allusive.

"In reflective/exploratory rhetoric, as in literary art, emblems are powerful intellectual devices because they are integral to the way the mind absorbs, interprets, and retains experience," writes Beale (276). One should notice that these devices are categories of the Montaignesque exemplum discussed in Chapter Two.

In this chapter I will discuss some of the essays of Lewis Thomas and Joan Didion in the context of the Montaignesque tradition of the essay. On the whole, the essays of these authors represent the part of the reflective/exploratory continuum which is closest to poetic and farthest from deliberation, and for this reason most readily yields to the instruments of the literary critic.

I. Lewis Thomas and Lyrical Science

Lewis Thomas's essays are at a mid-point on the continuum between Baconian and Montaignesque writers, that is between suasory reflective essays and lyrical ones. On the whole, Thomas's essays can be categorized with the more personal Montaignesque variety since, with certain exceptions, his pieces contain a strong element of lyrical celebration.

His praise of the biological world is delivered in the patient, ingratiating tones of an old-time doctor. Thomas's persona contributes a good deal to the success of the essays, which present biology with a kindly face. For those with unpleasant memories of being stuffed with esoteric biological facts, Thomas's essays on the independence of organelles, the toughness of human physiology, and the seamlessness of the natural world are invitations as well as celebrations.

Thomas's original audience were medical doctors, for his first essays were published in The New England Journal of Medicine. The son of a doctor and a nurse, Thomas is a doctor by training, graduating from Harvard Medical School in 1937 after earning a B.S. in biology from Yale. Thomas served his residency in neurology at the Neurological Institute of New York. But he was more interested in medical research than in practicing medicine. While serving

in the Navy during World War II, he carried out research on infectious diseases. After the war he practiced medicine once again as a pediatrician with the Harriet Lane Home for Invalid Children in Baltimore, but at the same time he was an assistant professor of pediatrics at Johns Hopkins University Medical School and conducted research on rheumatic fever as well as directed the bacteriology lab.

From 1948 until the present day, Thomas has been a teacher and administrator. He served as a professor at Tulane University School of Medicine, the University of Minnesota Medical School, New York University-Bellevue Medical Center, Yale University School of Medicine and as dean of both N.Y.U. School of Medicine and Yale's medical school. He capped his career in 1973 by being named president and chief executive officer of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. In 1980 he became the Center's chancellor. A bibliography of his scholarly publications contains over two-hundred entries.

In 1982 in an interview with Diane Dowdey, Thomas recounted the series of events that began his avocation as an essayist. In 1970, the editor of The New England Journal of Medicine, Franz Inglefinger was an old friend from his residency days. He asked Thomas to submit some essays to the Journal after Inglefinger read a published speech of Thomas's. Inglefinger and Thomas made a deal: Thomas would not be paid, and Inglefinger would accept the essays as they

were, making no editorial changes. Inglefinger's only editorial dictate was that the essays fit on one page. The essays were very popular and soon reached a non-medical audience. (In his autobiographical celebration of medicine, The Youngest Science (1983), Thomas writes that it was Joyce Carol Oates who wrote praising the essays from the Journal (243) and suggesting that he collect them.) Eventually, Viking published the essays in the collection entitled The Lives of a Cell, which surprised Thomas by not only selling very well but receiving a National Book Award. A second collection, The Medusa and the Snail was published in 1979, although by this time, after Inglefinger's retirement, Thomas had stopped writing for the Journal. In 1980, at the request of another friend, Andrew Heiskell who was Chairman of the Board of Time-Life, Thomas began writing essays for the popular science magazine Discover.

In several places he has described his essay writing as "fun" and biological research as "fun" as well (See Dowdey 517). Trying to make people see the interesting side of science has been one of his preoccupations. In answering Dowdey's question about what he is trying to convey to his "non-professional audience" Thomas replied:

> Well, I don't have any big comprehensive picture, but there are some misperceptions of scientists that I think exist in the general public mind that I would like to try to change. One of them is that science has acquired so much in the way of factual information and data that we're almost home with all the information

> that's needed for comprehending the world and that scientists should just go to work and sort it out and piece it together. My position is that what has happened in this century, when most of the science that's ever been done has been done, really has been the discovery of how little we know about nature and at the same time how puzzling and interesting what we don't know is. I think that's a new phenomenon. . . . The things that are happening in biology now are as mystifying as the things that began to happen earlier in this century in physics. It's a very strange place, and we're nowhere near settling anything. I want people to know it's great fun to have a chance to look at it. (524)

When Dowdey asked "why [he thinks] it's important to have people realize that doing science is fun?" Thomas replied that accomplishing this is his "occupation" (524), and thus gives an important clue as to his perceptions of the audience he wanted to reach in the Journal:

> Medical students are an oppressed class, engaged in intensive competition, trying to get high grades, and some of the fun gets taken out of it. Some of the brightest ones who should be doing research stay out of it because sometimes they think there is nothing more to be done except to patch up a few loose ends. Sometimes they think it's too hard or too competitive. I guess I try to persuade them that it's a good way to live a life. (524)

When he describes his notion of his audience for the Discover column, Thomas emphasizes his concern for the "undergraduates and grad students" who may read his essays (515). Comments such as this as well as Thomas's essays themselves create an impression of the essayist as a combination of interested teacher and benevolent doctor. Unlike the Baconian "suasory" essay, the Montaignesque type

depends heavily on the nurturing of such a kindly persona, a mild friend instead of the sharp-tongued critic we have seen in Will, Fussell, and Theroux. Furthermore, the persona of the Montaignesque essay usually is self-effacing, not only about his or her own importance but about the expectations he or she may have for the essays. Thus we have Montaigne assuring his readers that

> if I had written to seek the world's favor, I should have bedecked myself better, and should present myself in a studied posture. I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray. . . . Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject. (2)

And we see Lewis Thomas--who is a self-admitted devotee of Montaigne (see "Why Montaigne Is not a Bore" MS 145-150)--professing a haphazard route to essay writing:

> I had not written anything for fun since medical school and a couple of years thereafter, except for occasional light verse and once in a while a serious but not very clear or very good poem. Good bad verse was what I was pretty good at. The only other writing I'd done was scientific papers, around two hundred of them, composed in the relentlessly flat style required for absolute unambiguity in every word, hideous language as I read it today. The chance to break free of that kind of prose, and to try the essay form, raised my spirits, but at the same time worried me. I tried outlining some ideas for essays, making lists of items I'd like to cover in each piece, organizing my thoughts in orderly sequences, and wrote several dreadful essays which I could not bring myself to reread, and decided to give up being orderly. I changed the method to no method at all, picked out some suitable times late at night, usually on the weekend two days after I'd

> already passed the deadline, and wrote without outline or planning in advance, as fast as I could. This worked better, or at least was more fun, and I was able to get started. ("Essays and Gaia," YS 242)

In line with this approach to writing his essays, Thomas told Dowdey that he does "very little" revising, although some "outright rejecting."

> I'll read through something and discover it doesn't work, but when it does work, I don't change it much. I write in longhand and I look it over after the secretary types it, but once the first draft is done, I don't go back and do much revision. (518)

He compares his experience with writing essays to writing poetry and claims once again that he writes essays "for fun. It's a bit like writing poetry only easier. In poetry, when I write it, it very much has to sound right and that's hard" (517).

Thomas frequently mentions poetry in his essays and interviews--his own "good bad verse" as well as his favorite poets. To Dowdey's question about his favorite essayists, he mentions "E. B. White, E. M. Forster, C.S. Lewis, David Daiches" (520), but later in the interview, when Dowdy asks whom he wishes he could emulate as a writer he replies:

> mostly poets and not too many of them. I love reading Wallace Stevens, St. John Pierce, Auden, Nemerov. I don't know whether they've influenced me all that much or not. It's hard to tell. (525)

In fact, Thomas's essays often exemplify a pronounced lyricism, as we shall see in a closer analysis of several of his essays.

Before doing so, however, it is worthwhile to examine the background of the particular sub-genre of the essay in which Thomas is working--the popular science essay, a category which includes a number of talented scientist/writers such as Loren Eiseley, Steven Jay Gould, and Jeremy Bernstein.

While the contribution of the familiar essay to its scientific offshoot cannot be overemphasized, of equal importance is the legacy of scientific discourse to the genre. The development of a model for scientific writing has not been as easily charted, of course, as that of the familiar essay. The methods and processes of science have played an increasingly important role in almost every area of our lives, including language. In the history of scientific writing, champions of rhetoric and "pure" science have contended for the heart of scientific discourse, and at different periods of history, each has dominated notions of scientific communication. James L. Gooch gives a capsule history of science (writing in a 1976 issue of Bioscience) tracing the style from the seventeenth century, when "science" was communicated via the popular dialogue genre. In fact, according to Gooch, until the nineteenth century, "scientific prose conformed to literary models" (717).

The nineteenth century saw the explosion of new scientific discoveries which continues to our own day. After Lyell, Darwin, and Freud constructed the "paradigmatic" foundation, as Thomas Kuhn has called it, the specialized data collecting and experimentation of modern science began in earnest. The pace of technical spadework has only quickened with the passing years; an accompanying problem and concern is the accurate and readable reporting of the myriad developments, discoveries, and debunkings in modern science.

Joseph Wenzel, in his 1974 Quarterly Journal of Speech article "Rhetoric and Anti-Rhetoric in Early American Scientific Societies," gives an informative synopsis of the American scientific community's response in the nineteenth century to the debate over scientific writing. After studying the proceedings of various scientific societies--English and American--Wenzel concludes that scientific writing reflected the debate among rhetoricians. In the seventeenth century, under Bacon's guidance, scientists eschewed an ornamental style of writing, because ornament and other matters of style were associated with the truncated notion of rhetoric current at the time which emphasized style rather than methods of argument. "Style," explains Wenzel, "had lost all functional connection with the substance of discourse" (329), and scientists, led by Bacon, perceived this disjunction.

American scientists of the eighteenth century were influenced by the Royal Society's promotion of Ramistic "plain style" for scientific writing (332). Nevertheless, the battle over scientific style reemerged in the nineteenth century. Wenzel writes that

> the ambivalence grew stronger as the century progressed. It was the tension between the desire for artlessness in scientific discourse, on the one hand, and on the other, the growing realization that any form of discourse must be governed by art if it is to be perfected. Hence, about the middle of the nineteenth century, the general proscription of ornamentation gradually gave way to a general prescription for a new rhetoric conceived to meet the needs of a new age. (333)

This new rhetoric of science which Wenzel outlines broadly as a tailored version of the classical process of invention does not seem to have quashed the debate between rhetorical and "plainstyle" scientists. In this century, the public has become more and more alienated from the arcane communications of scientists. Scientists and science-watchers continue to explore, blame, and praise scientific writing. For example, Paul Newell Campbell, writing in the December 1975 issue of Quarterly Journal of Speech, explores "The 'Personae' of Scientific Writing" and debunks the "neutrality" of these personae.

> Certainly an approach that treats facts only as illustrations of theories is committed to the theories the facts illustrate. And to be committed to certain theoretical points of view is, of course, to advocate

> precisely the views to which one is committed; it is a rhetorical stance. (391-392)

The famed "unprejudiced" scientific viewpoint results, believes Campbell, in a "persona" perceived by the public as "displaying positively and actively . . . coldness, . . . disdain, . . . alienation" (405).

Such an alienated stance contrasts sharply with the deliberative aims of such authors of revolutionary scientific paradigms as Charles Darwin. Joel Black, in a paper read at the 1981 MLA conference, sees these paradigms, "by virtue of their inherent creativity and their relatively general intelligibility" being appropriated by "literature and humanities curriculums" (2). Black links these "paradigms" with the science essays we see sprouting everywhere--in magazines, newspapers, and anthologies. I believe, with Black, that these essays come in response to the public's thirst for scientific knowledge, a thirst analogous to the desire of the Renaissance public for classical moral teachings when the essay also served as a stop-gap measure. For these reasons, it is hard to view the sub-genre of the scientific essay as anything other than the "scientific" reflective-exploratory essay. Black's link between the scientific rhetorical paradigm and modern scientific essays holds up only in certain cases. Although Lewis Thomas may write an occasional deliberative essay on scientific matters, usually scientific deliberations are confined to

the context of scientific treatises. Furthermore, a deliberative essay by Thomas is likely to concern politics or ethics--not scientific theory. He may denigrate the "hideous prose" of scientific writing, but he continues to use that prose in his scholarly papers.

Thomas and other science popularizers such as Gould are at pains to make the public understand that there **are** arguments in science--and much room for doubt and wonder as well. One of Thomas's consistent themes, in fact, is the vast number of mysteries in science. He writes in "Humanities and Science" (LNT 143-155) that, on the whole "the scientific community is to blame" (147) because

> over the past half century, we have been teaching the sciences as though they were the same academic collection of cut-and-dried subjects as always, and--here is what has really gone wrong--as though they would always be the same. . . . Moreover, we have been teaching science as though its facts were somehow superior to the facts in all other scholarly disciplines, more fundamental, more solid, less subject to subjectivism, immutable. . . . And it is, of course, not like this at all. In real life, every field of science that I can think of is incomplete, and most of them . . . are still in the earliest stage of their starting point. (147-148)

Thomas cites as an example the current "running battle" between sociobiologists and "antisociobiologists":

> To observe, in open-mouthed astonishment, the polarized extremes, one group of highly intelligent, beautifully trained, knowledgeable, and imaginative scientists maintaining that all sorts of behavior, animal and human, are governed exclusively by genes, and another group of equally talented scientists saying precisely

> the opposite and asserting that all behavior is set and determined by the environment, or by culture, and both sides brawling in the pages of periodicals such as The New York Review of Books, is an educational experience that no college student should be allowed to miss. The essential lesson to be learned has nothing to do with the relative validity of the facts underlying the argument, it is the argument itself that is the education: we do not yet know enough to settle such questions. (149)

What one recognizes in such a passage is Thomas's rhetorical skill brought to bear on a deliberative point about science--that uncertainty and therefore the capacity for change undergird and inform the scientific enterprise as much as they do the humanities. But still, Thomas's argument is not about a particular scientific problem, and most scientific debates cannot be comprehended by readers of The New York Review of Books.

When Dowdey maintains that "there really seems no way for a humanist to do science the way a physicist can read a novel, so it becomes a closed world" (528), Thomas concedes that he too feels shut out of many scientific fields. But he also points out that humanists should know enough--and be interested enough--to "catch a glimpse" of many issues in science. To promote that interest, and to give a "glimpse" of the excitement in biological research is the larger motive behind his essays--both the suasory and lyrical varieties. It is also the aim, I suspect, of other science essayists such as Gould and Eiseley, who hope to stimulate interest in the broader areas of scientific research, the

areas accessible to non-scientists, and to act as teachers of a public which perceives science as a world if not dull then certainly closed and secret. We will now turn to some of Lewis Thomas's essays to see the variety of rhetorical resources he brings to his task of reaching both "cultures."

Several themes consistently appear and reappear in Thomas's essays, but underlying almost every piece is his notion of the universe as a seamless whole. For example in "The Music of this Sphere" (LC 20-25), Thomas suggests that the sounds that different creatures make--from the head banging of termites to the breast beating of gorillas--are forms of music, and that all music, including our own,

> might be the recapitulation of something else--an earliest memory, a score for the transformation of inanimate, random matter in chaos into the improbable, ordered dance of living forms. (24)

This seems a curiously romantic notion for a professional biologist to hold--and a view that contrasts rather sharply with the writings of a more hard-headed scientist/essayist such as Stephen Jay Gould. But as well as a biologist, Thomas is also a teacher, doctor, and poet, and it is these latter styles which predominate in the essays, and are the sustaining note of his apologia for the scientific enterprise, an enterprise in his opinion that makes a reverential--even ecstatic--response to the natural world not only understandable but inevitable.

Thomas seeks to dispel some unfortunate myths about science and scientists, especially the reductive idea that science is a compendium of dry, indisputable facts collected by dry, solitary specialists. Thomas challenges this stereotype with a very different picture of working scientists in his essay "Natural Science" (LC 100-102):

> I don't know of any other human occupation, even including what I have seen of art, in which the people engaged in it are so caught up, so totally preoccupied, so driven beyond their strength and resources.
>
> Scientists at work have the look of creatures following genetic instructions; they seem to be under the influence of a deeply placed human instinct. They are, despite their efforts at dignity, rather like young animals engaged in savage play. When they are near to an answer their hair stands on end, they sweat, they are awash in their own adrenalin. To grab the answer, and grab it first, is for them a more powerful drive than feeding or breeding or protecting themselves against the elements.
>
> It sometimes looks like a lonely activity, but it is as much the opposite of lonely as human behavior can be. There is nothing so social, so communal, so interdependent. An active field of science is like an immense intellectual anthill . . .. (101)

Thomas's insistence on the "naturalness" of scientists--their resemblance to young animals at play, their sweaty compulsion to keep playing even as they are "awash" in adrenalin--contradicts the desiccated "unnatural" stereotype. It is apparent in such passages that Thomas's eye for concrete, allusive language--his poetic gift--fuels the often unspoken rhetorical aims of his essays.

Thomas's apologies for scientists--and their work--often take the form of lyrical descriptions of the wonders

they explore, especially in his branch of science. His lyricism reaches its highest pitch when he describes the look of life itself, from the smallest organism to the largest. All are interesting and strange, and all seem related so that the earth appears to be an enormous teeming entity:

> The overwhelming astonishment, the queerest structure we know about so far in the whole universe, the greatest of all cosmological scientific puzzles, confounding all our efforts to comprehend it, is the earth. We are only now beginning to appreciate how strange and splendid it is, how it catches the breath, the loveliest object afloat around the sun, enclosed in its own blue bubble of atmosphere, manufacturing and breathing its own oxygen, fixing its own nitrogen from the air into its own soil, generating its own weather at the surface of its rain forests, constructing its own carapace from living parts: chalk cliffs, coral reefs, old fossils from earlier forms of life now covered by layers of new life meshed together around the globe, Troy upon Troy.
>
> Seen from the right distance, from the corner of the eye of an extraterrestrial visitor, it must surely seem a single creature, clinging to the round warm stone, turning in the sun. ("The Corner of the Eye," LNT 16-17)

There are many such passages in Thomas's essays in which the earth is portrayed as a living organism. "Viewed from the distance of the moon, the astonishing thing about the earth, catching the breath, is that it is alive," he begins his essay "The World's Biggest Membrane" (LC 145-148). "It has the organized, self-contained look of a live creature, full of information, marvelously skilled in handling the sun" (145). Again and again Thomas emphasizes

the liveliness of the world, using such words as "warm," "sun," "generating," "breath," and "breathing." But Thomas is not just giving voice to a poetic impulse in such writing, although his aesthetic pleasure at this "splendid" place is certainly sincere. His other aim, which has become increasingly overt over the years, is rhetorical: the "teaching" voice predominates in the essays from Discover and collected in Late Night Thoughts. It is a more blatantly suasory voice, in other words, than in the earlier essays written for The New England Journal of Medicine. And the point that Thomas wishes to make about living things is not only that they are sublime and worthy of lyric praise, but that humans must be more responsible, especially in this age of nuclear weapons. This theme is sounded with increasing frequency from one collection of Thomas's essays to another.

On the other hand, Thomas's "doctorly" voice resounds through the earlier essays--an appropriate persona for Thomas to cultivate in addressing medical students and other doctors from month to month. This voice is often as lyrical as Thomas the teacher, but its cast is completely different. Whereas Thomas as teacher warns, Thomas as doctor reassures. In many essays in Lives of a Cell and The Medusa and the Snail, Thomas tells his readers that nature is not only tough and resilient, but amazingly well planned as well, so that the natural events that people find the most terrifying--disease and death--can be viewed as interesting and

even kind. In "Germs," for example, he assures his readers that the worst aspects of disease are not caused by bacteria, but by the elaborate defenses which "overreact" to certain stimuli (LC 75-79). Our neurotic fears about disease result in a society saturated with disinfectant sprays and swathed in plastic. "Watching television, you'd think we lived at bay, in total jeopardy, surrounded on all sides by human seeking germs . . ." (75). Instead, "in real life . . . even in our worst circumstances we have always been a relatively minor interest of the vast microbial world" (76).

Death too, for Thomas, has few alarms. He suggests in "On Natural Death" (MS 102-105) that endorphins rush through the system of a dying creature because "pain is useful for avoidance, for getting away when there's time to get away . . ." however "when it is end game, and no way back, pain is likely to be turned off, and the mechanisms for this are wonderfully precise and quick" (105). The spate of books on death suggests that dying is "a new sort of skill which all of us are now required to learn" (102). But Thomas, the seasoned doctor, reminds us here and in other essays that dying is not only painless but part of a synchronic system:

> We will have to give up the notion that death is catastrophe, or detestable, or avoidable, or even strange. We will need to learn more about the cycling of life in the rest of the system, and about our connection to the process. Everything that comes alive seems to be in trade for something that dies, cell for

> cell. There might be some comfort in the recognition of synchrony, in the information that we all go down together, in the best of company. ("Death in the Open," LC 98-99)

This is sound advice for all his readers, but especially useful perhaps for the medical students whom Thomas liked to envision reading his essays in the New England Journal.

The doctor and teacher merge in the many passages in Thomas's essays which explain and celebrate the intricacies of living creatures--the celebration and explanation enhanced by a lyricism which rarely transgresses C. Day Lewis's standards of brevity, simplicity, and subjectivity rather than personality. Nevertheless, in some instances Thomas cannot make an essay work, and I believe the fault is usually related to a lack of lyric restraint. Since this is the kind of failure which I see as an occupational hazard of the Montaignesque essayist, and one that is rather widespread in an age suffused with expressive writing, it is useful for us to compare a successful essay with an example of what may be viewed as one of Thomas's lyric failures.

Both essays are written on the same difficult theme. "An Earnest Proposal," one of Thomas's earlier essays, was first published in the New England Journal of Medicine and included in Lives of a Cell (26-30). It is the first essay in Thomas's collections to sound the note of one of his continuing themes--the danger and stupidity of nuclear weapons. This is also the theme of the title essay of his

last collection, Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony. The treatment of the theme is very different in each essay, however, and illustrates Auden's idea that there is as much need for discipline in a lyrical essay as in a lyrical poem.

"An Earnest Proposal" is a much more restrained piece than "Late Night Thoughts." The restraint is mainly a result of understatement and irony, the sort of irony meticulously practiced by Montaigne, who is forever shrugging his shoulders and feinting half-hearted interest in matters which interest him the most. Thomas's title suggests Swift's sardonic "A Modest Proposal" which develops ironic understatement into a perfect satire of "reasoned," "dispassionate" argument. Swift's essay and a number of other literary precedents from Great Expectations to The Waste Land demonstrate the astringent value of irony in a presentation of subjects which might otherwise overwhelm both author and audience--subjects of deep moral and/or emotional significance.

In "An Earnest Proposal" Thomas is able to merge irony with metaphorical description. The essay relies on paradox; Thomas suggests that "until we have acquired a really complete set of information concerning at least one living thing" we should "defer further action" on nuclear weapons (27). After all, much of our planning and thinking is increasingly done by computers, "that will be giving

instructions to cities, to nations" and, he implies, to nuclear weapons as well. We all would agree--even "our practical men" who run things--that these machines should "contain every least bit of relevant information about the way of the world" (27). Thomas implies that the chore may be bigger than we at first imagine and underscores his point by picking one of the simplest creatures on earth as the "one living thing" we should attempt to understand before we resume planning for nuclear war. "Even the nuclear realists, busy as their minds must be with calculations of acceptable levels of megadeath, would not want to overlook anything" (27).

The core of "An Earnest Proposal" is a detailed description of the tiny one-celled organism which is Thomas's candidate for exhaustive research, an humble creature which dwells in the gut of Australian termites. Its name appropriately enough is **Myxotricha paradoxa**. In explaining what biologists know about this organism Thomas suggests two points: first that even the smallest creature is an infinite mystery and secondly that every form of life seems connected. The latter is a direct contradiction of what "the practical men" view as the natural order--the darkest version of evolutionary theory:

> They have been taught that the world is an arrangement of adversary systems, that force is what counts, aggression is what drives us at the core, only the fittest survive, and only might can make more might.

> Thus, it is in observance of nature's law that we have planted, like perennial tubers, the numberless nameless missiles in the soil of Russia and China and our Midwestern farmlands, with more to come, poised to fly out at a nanosecond's notice, and meticulously engineered to ignite, in the centers of all our cities, artificial suns. (27)

For Thomas, the **Myxotricha** is a contradiction to this "tooth and claw" version of the natural world. With his teacher's--and poet's--gift for metaphorical descriptions, he presents **Myxotricha** as not only more complex but more beautiful than "practical" unimaginative men may guess. With careful attention to connotation--using such phrases as "epicenter" of "the termite ecosystem, an arrangement of Byzantine complexity"--he elevates his one-celled subject to a central position in a splendid subterranean kingdom. The termite too is edified as a creature whose wood excretions--made possible by **Myxotricha**--are "geometrically tidy pellets . . . use[d] as building blocks for the erection of arches and vaults in the termite nest" (28). **Myxotricha** himself (I adopt Thomas's familiar use of the masculine rather than the colder neutral pronoun) is a little world of smaller entities instead of the self-sufficient packet of cytoplasm we might imagine. Thomas reminds us in this essay as well as many others (for example, see "Organelles as Organisms" LC 69-74) that the organelles--such as the mitochondria, lysosomes and so on--contained in one-celled creatures were once free-wheeling prokaryotic creatures until they were

absorbed by the eukaryotic unicellular organisms billions of years ago. Thomas uses the biological fact that living things tend to coalesce to draw a picture of all nature's interdependence.

> If we could understand this tendency, we would catch a glimpse of the process that brought single separate cells together for the construction of metazoans, culminating in the invention of roses, dolphins, and, of course, ourselves. It might turn out that the same tendency underlies the joining of organisms into communities, communities into ecosystems, and ecosystems into the biosphere. If this is, in fact, the drift of things, the way of the world, we may come to view immune reactions, genes for the chemical marking of self, and perhaps all reflexive responses of aggression and defense as secondary developments in evolution, necessary for the regulation and modulation of symbiosis, not designed to break into the process, only to keep it from getting out of hand. (29)

In short, if **Myxotricha** is the way of the world, then the "practical men" and their nightmare vision of contentious nature are wrong, and the missiles, "planted like perennial tubers," are an unnatural aberration. It is a point made subtly and with great effect: Thomas guides his reader to this conclusion with a minimal amount of overt prodding. His secondary theme--the infinite mystery of everything in nature--is reiterated at the end of the essay when he contrasts once again the simplicity of our machines, the machines so beloved by the practical men, and the complexity of the "simplest" one-celled creature. Thomas concludes that the result of an exhaustive analysis of the humble **Myxotricha paradoxa** in fulfillment of his "earnest

proposal" would be a befuddled computer crying uncle and delaying nuclear war indefinitely : "Requests more data. How are spirochetes attached? Do not fire" (30).

This elegantly crafted essay which leads the reader to an ineluctable conclusion about a formidable topic contrasts sharply with Thomas's essay on the same subject, "Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony" (LNT 164-68). Analyzing this essay is instructive in several ways: first because we can see a different sort of ethical appeal, one that is not as successful as the dry, ironic persona of so many Thomas essays; and second, as I already indicated, this essay demonstrates some of the shortcomings of a rather undisciplined lyricism that is personal--to the point of "showing off," as Auden puts it--rather than subjective.

The essay relies on one of Thomas's most persistent themes--music--as a controlling metaphor. As we have seen, Thomas sometimes uses music as signifying the harmony of the universe ("The Music of This Sphere" LC 20-25). On another level, both music and language are for Thomas symbols of transcendent wonder, and a cause for celebration that humans can make such a thing:

> Surely, music (along with ordinary language) is as profound a problem for human biology as can be thought of, and I would like to see something done about it. . . . [A government funded committee could start] on a very small scale and with a very limited mission and a modest budget: a narrow question, like Why is The Art of the Fugue so important and what does this single piece of music do to the human mind? Later on, there

> will be other questions, harder to deal with. ("Things Unflattened by Science" LNT 79)

In "Late Night Thoughts" Thomas uses music once again as an important symbol, but in a very different way. In describing his response to Mahler's Ninth Symphony, Thomas expresses his terror and despair at the prospect of nuclear war. At one time, he

> took this music as 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. I rely on nature. The long passages on all the strings at the end, as close as music can come to expressing silence itself, I used to hear as Mahler's idea of leave-taking at its best. But always, I have heard this music as a solitary, private listener, thinking about death. (164)

Now, however, he

> cannot listen to the last movement of the Mahler Ninth without the door-smashing intrusion of a huge new thought: death everywhere, the dying of everything, the end of humanity. The easy sadness expressed with such gentleness and delicacy by that repeated phrase on faded strings, over and over again, no longer comes to me as old, familiar news of the cycle of living and dying. All through the last notes my mind swarms with images of a world in which the thermonuclear bombs have begun to explode, in New York and San Francisco, in Moscow and Leningrad, in Paris, in Paris, in Paris. (165)

The rest of the essay is an account of Thomas's dark fancy of what it must be like for a "young person sixteen or seventeen years old" to face the possibility of destruction that the missile buildup threatens. Older people like

himself, Thomas explains, are "moving along anyway, like it or not" (165). Although he can no longer entertain benign fancies of "hanging around in some sort of midair" after his death, he can assimilate the thought of nuclear war, because he is close to death.

Thomas alternates between sympathetic evocations of what it must be like to be young now compared to his own sheltered youth, and the jarring reminders of the nuclear age--a government pamphlet on MX missiles, a man on a news program who explains how many Americans might be "saved" in a nuclear war. The pattern is reminiscent, probably consciously so, of a musical theme and counter-theme. If this device had been more carefully and obviously carried out, it might have helped to counter the excessive sentimentality of the essay, providing a formal discipline.

The problem with this essay is a lack of formal control, and also a peculiarity of voice. In "An Earnest Proposal," Thomas speaks from the vantage of a biologist: we trust his expertise and therefore accept his pronouncements on the one-celled creature which serves as his emblem; thus we are able to more readily accept his essayistic connection between the organism and the stupidity and wrong-headedness of nuclear weapons. On the other hand, in "Late Night Thoughts," Thomas speaks from a different point of view--as an amateur musicologist rather than an expert biologist.

It is not Thomas's moralizing to which one might object in "Late Night Thoughts." We are used to his opinions, even those as overtly expressed as some of the suasory pieces from Discover which are collected in Late Night Thoughts. In his interview with Dowdey, Thomas labels his most "persuasive" pieces as "propaganda" (518) and says that on "two issues--the importance of basic science and the importance of getting rid of thermonuclear bombs--I fully intend to argue" (521). Nevertheless, Thomas's most persuasive moral arguments are grounded in anecdotes from biology, his area of expertise. His ethical appeal in "Late Night Thoughts" is undercut by amateurishness and a sort of self-advertising sensitivity which at times smacks of arrogance. The steady undercurrent of irony in "An Earnest Proposal" keeps Thomas's suasory appeal from becoming too shrill. Interestingly enough, in "Late Night Nights" lyricism predominates over deliberation, but the lack of irony leaves this piece of "propaganda" unmuted and at times as emotional as the most passionate measures of Mahler's Ninth.

The lyricism is undisciplined, and personality predominates over subjectivity. Thomas's private reaction to the symphony is too idiosyncratic for his readers to share. We are not prepared for the leap from strings to bombs. Furthermore his repetition of "in Paris, in Paris, in Paris," does not act as a cohesive refrain but, instead,

seems a highly self-conscious lament, especially when followed by Thomas's despairing passage on the possible destruction of his "favorite part of the world . . . the Engadin, from the Moloja Pass to Ftan"--a part of the world his readers likely care little about.

The final paragraph of the essay reaches an even higher pitch of emotion as Thomas tries to imagine the reaction of young people to absurd governmental projections and debates on nuclear war.

> If I were sixteen or seventeen years old and had to listen to that, or read things like that, I would want to give up listening and reading. I would begin thinking up new kinds of sounds, different from any music heard before, and I would be twisting and turning to rid myself of human language. (168)

Thomas's description of what he would do if he were sixteen or seventeen does not jibe with what most teenagers would do and are doing--that is, living their lives as unconscious of imminent death as was Thomas in his youth. The reader's credibility is stretched beyond repair.

An interesting note on this essay--and a possible explanation for its fatal idiosyncracy--is the circumstances of its composition. Thomas told Dowdey that he wrote the essay for himself and did not intend to publish it until his daughter ("who has a degree in musicology") suggested that he send it to Discover (518).

For the purposes of this study, "Late Night Thoughts" is useful as an example of a Montaignesque essay flawed by relying on personality rather than subjectivity and a self-conscious, humorless lyricism. We might accept the latter more readily if Thomas had established himself as a sensitive dilettante in the Charles Lamb mold. But Lewis Thomas's audience identifies him with another sort of persona--that of a scientist with the instincts of an old-time doctor. Readers will listen to almost anything that Thomas has to say in the confident "bardic" voice of a biologist and doctor, persuaded by and enjoying his poetic gift for description and analogy, but they may not sit still for his amateur, impressionistic pronouncements on music, especially those at once so private and propagandistic.

Nevertheless, "Late Night Thoughts" is an uncharacteristically flawed piece, and it would be unfair to leave this discussion of Thomas without reiterating the special contributions he has made to the essay, especially the de facto genre of the science essay. Thomas has been able to portray the beauty of a world which many of us wrongly associate with scrubbed laboratories and cold hearts. In telling the stories of strange unicellular creatures, passionate researchers and other biological marvels, he is a remarkable apologist--a troubadour scientist who recites the poetry of the "other" culture.

II. Joan Didion and the Impersonal Confession

"Usually I spend a great deal of time finding a tone that is not my own, and then adopting the tone and getting it right. . . . Normally I have difficulty 'expressing myself' in any natural way. I'm not that open," (Friedman 25). This seems an odd statement from a writer who laces her essays with emblems taken from her own experience--her failing marriage, her mental collapse--stark examples from her life to stand for a splintered culture. Nevertheless, Didion's statement is true. Her essays--even the ones concerning her private life--are all delivered in the cool tones of journalistic prose, and it is this detached tone which makes these essays so powerful.

Lewis Thomas nearly always eludes sentimentality by presenting "only the facts" in the voice--often ironic--of the experienced observer. Many of Didion's essays, too, are constructed on this formula, although her voice is not that of a specialized expert--scientific or otherwise--but of an astute reporter of current events, events which assume the same symbolic value as Thomas's organelles. In other essays, Didion steps into the more dangerous waters of personal experience. Unlike Thomas, however, her control in either case is almost infallible. Didion seems to have captured the best of two rather incompatible essay tradi-

tions--the romantic confessional and the "Baroque" or Montaignesque skeptical.

John Romano echoes the judgment of many critics who find her essays superior to her fiction:

> [Her writing] balances an objective-seeming precision of language and observed detail against the feeling that a particular person is speaking to us, an intelligent, likable, and utterly subjective, even prejudiced person; and, as it happens, someone who lives in or near a condition of unhysterical despair. In this balance there is an explanation for something that is often said about Joan Didion--that her essays are excellent, whereas her fiction is only just good. In Run River and Play It as It Lays, personal idiosyncrasies overrun the writing, and drench it in desperation; in the essays, with their necessary burden of fact and information, the balance is better kept. (Friedman 142)

Romano does not credit enough, I think, the part that Didion's fanatical attention to structure and her perfect pitch play in the emotional control of the essays. Personal idiosyncracy has contributed to her success: because she is reticent she searches for a "tone that is not [her] own"; because she is obsessive about order in her own life, she is obsessive about it as well in her essays. As she has told Michiko Kakutani:

> Order and control are terribly important to me. I would love to just have control over my own body--to stop the pain, to stop my hand from shaking. If I were 5 feet 10 and had a clear gaze and a good strong frame I would not have such a maniacal desire for control because I would have it. (Friedman 40)

Not only are the essays' structure an extension of Didion's character, but the themes of the essays as well--the disappearing world of traditional values, the generation of virtue and vice in individual people rather than systems, the fictional nature of the meanings that people ascribe to events. But, of course, Didion's character is also a product of a social context. The essays garnered from the Saturday Evening Post and Life columns and contained in the two collections Slouching towards Bethlehem (1968) and The White Album (1979), are the history of individualism confronted with mass dissolution in the sixties and seventies.

As a fifth generation Californian and temperamental loner, Didion seems to embody the spirit of the Old West, whether or not that spirit is mythical. Because she is also part of "The Business" of moviemaking--she and her husband John Gregory Dunne have collaborated on screenplays for over a dozen movies and are friends with many people in the film industry--she has an insider's view of the essence of cultural story telling which has produced not only variations of the "New Adam" myth but "dreampolitik" as well. In the title essay of The White Album she begins with a account of this mythmaking and its importance:

> We tell ourselves stories in order to live. The princess is caged in the consulate. The man with the candy will lead the children into the sea. The naked woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor is a victim of accidie, or the naked woman is an exhibitionist, and it would be 'interesting' to know

> which. . . . We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, the "ideas" with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience. (11)

The rest of the essay is an account of the personal devastation caused by Didion's inability to continue to believe in "the stories." Between 1966 and 1971 she found herself "improvising" instead of following a story line:

> This was an adequate enough performance, as improvisations go. The only problem was that my entire education, everything I had ever been told or had told myself, insisted that the production was never meant to be improvised: I was supposed to have a script, and had mislaid it. I was supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no "meaning" beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience. In what would probably be the middle of my life I wanted still to believe in the narrative and in the narrative's intelligibility, but to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical. (12-13)

Eventually, as Didion relates in the most matter of fact way, she checks into a psychiatric hospital where her clinical report relates a condition which represents, she implies, the condition of many people--even a cultural condition. She is described as having "alienated herself almost entirely from the world of other human beings," of having a "fantasy life . . . virtually completely preempted

by primitive, regressive libidinal preoccupations many of which are distorted and bizarre," of feeling "that all human effort is foredoomed to failure, a conviction which seems to push her further into a dependent, passive withdrawal" (14).

Didion succeeds in this tricky business of using her personal breakdown as an emblem of cultural breakdown by maintaining the neutral tone of the objective observer. Furthermore, the essay genre, because it is "true," lends itself to such a metaphorical use of private experience.

Didion's account of her emblematic collapse is lent credibility by the anecdotes of the many strange conversations and encounters she has during these years--of comparing notes on publication advances and problems with Eldridge Cleaver while he sat in jail, of shopping for a dress for Linda Kasabian's appearance in the Manson trials, of witnessing the collaborative efforts of college administrators and student radicals in obtaining television coverage for campus demonstrations. All are samples of "cuts" which do not fit into a traditional story line. Just as in "Shooting an Elephant," the fact that these events--in this essay and others equally self-revelatory--are true (or presented as true) makes them more potent emblems of corporate dissolution than like experiences transposed on to a fictional character. In fact, Didion's and Orwell's success in the essay form, and their relative lack of success in fiction, gives credence to the suggestion that

fiction cannot gracefully carry such an overtly rhetorical load. When it is attempted, as in Burmese Days or Play It as It Lays, the result seems overwritten and even pretentious. Interestingly enough, Didion herself has criticized Doris Lessing for paying more attention to rhetoric than to poetic in her fiction. In an essay contained in The White Album she writes:

> That she is a writer of considerable native power, a "natural" writer in the Dreiserian mold, someone who can close her eyes and "give" a situation by the sheer force of her emotional energy, seems almost a stain on her conscience. She views her real gift for fiction much as she views her own biology, as another trick to entrap her. She does not want to "write well." Her leaden disregard for even the simplest rhythms of language, her arrogantly bad ear for dialogue--all of that is beside her own point. More and more, Mrs. Lessing writes exclusively in the service of immediate cosmic reform: she wants to write, as the writer Anna in The Golden Notebook wanted to write, only to "create a new way of looking at life." (119-20)

Didion's harshest criticisms of Lessing's fiction are directed at Briefing for a Descent into Hell, a novel in which the insanity of the heroine is the only "sane" response to an insane world, the theme which forms the subtext of "The White Album." Didion's comparative success with the theme is an unspoken criticism of Lessing.

Because Didion uses the essay genre for the recounting of potentially melodramatic examples, she has the potent tool of self-deprecation at her disposal. A fictional character can be self-deprecatory too, of course, but the

effect is not as forceful. A successful self-deprecating narrator such as Jack Burden in All the King's Men must make it clear that he is telling a story about an earlier, more foolish and self-deluding version of himself without giving away the ending of the story. Furthermore, in so doing he must make his irony seem genuine self-deprecation rather than self-pity, as for instance, the unsympathetic whining of Orwell's protagonist, Flory, in Burmese Days. The author of a fictional ironist must overcome not only the initial hurdle of his audience's suspension of disbelief inherent to all literature, but also a second hurdle of suspicion that an ironic narrator or protagonist is a stand-in for the author himself who wishes more to preach than to tell a story. An essayist, on the other hand, is a self-acknowledged moralist, whose recital of humiliating experiences does not require a suspension of disbelief, since his story is "true."

In the essay, "On Going Home," for example, Didion examines the difficulty of introducing her husband to the habits and secrets she shares with her parents and brother:

> We live in dusty houses ("D-U-S-T," [her husband] once wrote with his finger on surfaces all over the house, but no one noticed it) filled with mementos quite without value to him (what could the Canton dessert plates mean to him? how could he have known about the assay scales, why should he care if he did know?), and we appear to talk exclusively about people we know who have been committed to mental hospitals, about people we know who have been booked on drunk-driving charges, and about property, particularly about property, land,

> price per acre and C-2 zoning and assessments and freeway access. (164)

With these humble examples, Didion suggests the comic side of the sad ritual of "meeting one's past at every turn, around every corner, inside every cupboard" (166) as well as the strong affection she has for her family. Therefore, the force of the dramatic ending of the essay which states one of Didion's themes--the impossibility anymore of having such a family matrix, of establishing a net for one's own child--is all the more poignant.

Joan Didion's deeply rooted family background seems to be the source of her despair in witnessing the breakdown of such a tradition. She was born into an old Sacramento family, although she had an early taste of the alienating rootlessness which later would affect the wandering adolescents of the sixties. Her father was an Air Force Colonel, and during World War II, she and her family moved from base to base. This, of course, was also the experience of millions of other Americans during the early forties and perhaps explains that generation's dismay at the upheavals of the sixties. Having regained "order" and a sense of community they were sorry to see these disrupted by a cultural war.

She writes of her years at Berkeley in her essay "On the Morning after the Sixties" and explains the orientation of her generation to moral questions:

> We were that generation called "silent," but we were silent neither, as some thought, because we shared the period's official optimism not, as others thought, because we feared its official repression. We were silent because the exhilaration of social action seemed to many of us just one more way of escaping the personal, of masking for a while that dread of the meaningless which was man's fate. . . . That most of us found adulthood just as morally ambiguous as we expected it to be falls perhaps into the category of prophecies self-fulfilled: I am simply not sure. I am telling you only how it was. (206-207)

Actually Didion's essays provide the evidence that she is a good deal surer about the ambiguity of existence as a continuing truth rather than a "self-fulfilling prophecy." This view may be common to her generation, but it is one which Didion continues to hold.

In her essays Didion engages in a continuing quest to see things as they really are, not as she or others might fictionalize them. For example, in the title essay of Slouching towards Bethlehem, she explores the self-delusions of the adolescent hippies of Haight-Asbury whose lack of education in the values of the culture makes them prey to the pseudo-philosophies surrounding drug use and political ideologies. The vignettes which she culled from an extended stay in the district in the late sixties are organized into a series of "cuts" reminiscent of "The White Album." In the manner of New Journalism she uses the narrative mode with particular attention to dialogue. But the "cuts" are more than random fragments; they are arranged in a definite order

which lead inexorably to Didion's conclusion that the children of Haight-Asbury represent the dissolution of a culture where "the center cannot hold" and the young are driven back on their own devices and eventually into the control of sinister forces. John Hollowell has commented that Didion "learned this technique [of "jump cuts"] from the movies" (Friedman 164).

Didion's particular temperament is "theatrical," she has said in an interview with Michiko Kakutani (Friedman 33). She also portrays herself as a disillusioned romantic. She told Susan Stamberg on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," for example, that she is

> rather a slow study, and I came late to the apprehension that there was a void at the center of experience. A lot of people realize this when they're fifteen or sixteen, but I didn't realize until I was much older that it was possible that the dark night of the soul was . . . aridity. I had thought that it was something much riper and more sinful. One of the books that made the strongest impression on me when I was in college was The Portrait of a Lady. Henry James's heroine, Isabel Archer, was the prototypic romantic idealist. It trapped her, and she ended up a prisoner of her own ideal. I think a lot of us do. . . . The reality does intervene eventually. (Friedman 27)

It is characteristic of Didion that she portrays herself depreciatingly as "a slow study," when her incisive comments on contemporary life are evidence to the contrary.

It is also characteristic that she describes disillusionment in sensual terms. Didion's explanation of why she became a writer involves the same combination of self-

deprecation and concrete induction. In "Why I Write," which was first published in The New York Times Book Review, Didion explains that her emergence as a writer was founded on her failure as a thinker:

> I am not in the least an intellectual, which is not to say that when I hear the word "intellectual" I reach for my gun, but only to say that I do not think in abstracts. During the years when I was an undergraduate at Berkeley I tried, with a kind of hopeless late-adolescent energy, to buy some temporary visa into the world of ideas, to forge for myself a mind that could deal with the abstract.
>
> In short I tried to think. I failed. My attention veered inexorably back to the specific, to the tangible, to what was generally considered, by everyone I knew then and for that matter have known since, the peripheral. (Friedman 5)

Fortunately, she abandoned the quest to be an intellectual and concentrated instead on apprehending the world through the concrete. After graduating from Berkeley in 1956, she moved to New York to work for Vogue, having won a writing competition sponsored by that magazine. At Vogue she was first assigned to write captions. Kakutani interviewed her former editor, Allene Talmey, whom he describes as "a perfectionist" and who explained that she asked Didion to "write three hundred to four hundred words and then cut it back to fifty. We wrote long and published short and by doing that Joan learned to write" (Friedman 35-36). Didion's captions were often descriptions of elaborately decorated rooms. Later she "went on to write stories on furniture,

homes and personalities; the exercises honed her unfailing eye for detail and fine-tuned her lean prose" (36).

While she was in New York, the pull of the West never ceased for Didion. Her first novel Run River, which she wrote in New York, was set in the Sacramento Valley. After her 1964 marriage to Dunne, who wrote for Time, she and her new husband moved back to California. One of her essays records her sense of alienation in New York--"Goodbye to All That,"--and most are concerned in some way with California, even though she believes the "real" California, of farms and small town politics and Western self-reliance, is disappearing. In "Notes from a Native Daughter" she says that

> it is hard to find California now, unsettling to wonder how much of it was merely imagined or improvised; melancholy to realize how much of anyone's memory is no true memory at all but only the traces of someone else's memory, stories handed down on the family network. (177)

California itself is a concrete example and distillation for Didion of the larger sense of loss shared by everyone in the face of the social upheavals of the last several decades and a sign as well of how the old meanings were as sadly insubstantial as the new ones. Nevertheless, she continues to refer to these older traditions and locates her own set of values within them. Thus she can tell Kakutani that her dislike of the reasonable "middle road" and her concomitant affection for "extremes" is probably a

result of her background "as a daughter of the Golden West." (Friedman 33). The stories of "extreme action" may not have been entirely true, but nevertheless inform her moral code.

We can see that Didion is a sort of representative "fideistic" skeptic, who realizes that many of the "truths" that people hold dear are false, but who continues to search for the meaning behind events anyway. Along the way, she turns her clear eye not only on the new myths engendered by the movies and the press, but on the equally fallacious and probably more destructive "systems" which have taken the place of the old stories.

For example, one of her finest essays, "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream," is an attempt by Didion to explain a San Bernardino County wife's murder of her dentist husband by seeing it not as an isolated aberration, but as an exaggeration of a common phenomenon. Didion suggests that Lucille Maxwell, the "high spirited" wife, saw her life as a melodrama. Thus her affair with a local lawyer and her subsequent murder of her husband is portrayed by Didion (like so many other social breakdowns) the nightmarish result of people living lives according to the movies. The people of San Bernardino County have abandoned their traditional religious fundamentalism for an equally devout belief in Hollywood. Explains Didion:

> This is the county in which a belief in the literal interpretation of Genesis has slipped imperceptibly

> into a belief in the literal interpretation of Double Indemnity . . .. Here is where the hot wind blows and the old ways do not seem relevant, where the divorce rate is double the national average and where one person in every thirty-eight lives in a trailer. Here is the last stop for all those who come from somewhere else, for all those who drifted away from the cold and the past and the old ways. Here is where they are trying to find a new life style, trying to find it in the only places they know to look: the movies and the newspapers. (SB 4)

As Didion describes events leading up to the murder, she increasingly uses the narrative mode--recreating conversations between Lucille and her lover, paraphrasing the trial transcript--although she firmly directs the piece with discursive evaluations used as rhetorical markers along the way. Thus she begins her discussion of the Maxwells' marriage with a variation of the beginning of Anna Karenina, a marker which reiterates her view of the murder as paradigm rather than aberration:

> Unhappy marriages so resemble one another that we do not need to know too much about the course of this one. There may or may not have been trouble on Guam, where Cork and Lucille Miller lived while he finished his Army duty. There may or may not have been problems in the small Oregon town where he first set up private practice. (8)

Didion's seeming lack of interest in the details of the Maxwells' trouble is another strategy which subordinates the particulars of the narrative to its universal significance. This is usually the case in her essays: the details of a narrative are the concrete universals of a moral. Her

statement that she has trouble "opening up" is plausible: she uses the details of people's lives--including her own--to make larger points rather than to express idiosyncracies. Keeping her eye on the commonality of experience disciplines and directs her essays and also contributes to their "coolness" of tone.

The rhetorical use of narrative in essays is not a technique invented by the new journalists such as Didion, although new journalists have successfully, even spectacularly, exploited the resources of dialogue and realistic "plot." Other essay writers from Montaigne with his personal exempla to present-day political satirists such as Calvin Trillin, Russell Baker, and Art Buchwald consistently have used stories to make arguments. Didion, however, is a particularly interesting example of a narrative essayist, since she brings her gifts for the lyrical and the ironic to the challenge of addressing subjects of high moral seriousness. As Joyce Carol Oates has written:

> Joan Didion is not, of course, alone in her passionate investigation of the atomization of contemporary society. But she is one of the few writers of our time who approaches her terrible subject with absolute seriousness, with fear and humility and awe. Her powerful irony is often sorrowful rather than clever. (Friedman 140)

Oates, like so many of Didion's critics, notes the dispassionate quality of Didion's prose in which "very little emotion is expressed" (140). Her explanation, like

John Hollowell's, is that this coolness is meant as a kind of mirror of a world in which horrible events numb expression: "Emotion itself has become atrophied," writes Oates (140). Such explanations overlook one of the traditional rhetorical strengths of irony, that is, that an ironic narrator transfers the emotional "work" of a piece to his audience. A satirist like Swift or an ironic essayist like Didion purport to give us just the story, although the elements of the story are calculated to powerfully affect us. Coolness of tone is essential, since an enraged or distraught author/narrator frees and distances an audience from the burden of emotion.

In the following analysis of two of Didion's essays, we can see irony as a way not only of disciplining potentially melodramatic subjects but, paradoxically, as a way of emotionally engaging an audience. Didion's use of irony is in counterpoint to her gift for lyrical narration, which emotionally captures her audience in as powerful a way as her irony.

In "On Morality" (SB 157-163), Didion solves the immemorial problem of all essayists in making didacticism palatable. The problem in this essay is compounded because her subject is, after all, so obviously "moralistic." Through her use of evocative examples, manipulation of modes, and voice modulation, Didion preaches a sermon so

subtly that the mood of the essay accomplishes what strings of aphorisms could not in this anti-authoritarian age.

"On Morality," like so many of Didion's titles ("California Dreaming," "The White Album," "Slouching toward Bethlehem") resonates with allusion. In this case the title is forthright and ironic at the same time. The essay is an attempt to define morality, but it is not the measured definition of a Baconian essayist. Instead, Didion uses Montaigne's inductive method of recounting several examples as evidence for her general proposition that morality can only be ascribed to those actions which contribute to "survival, not the attainment of the ideal good" (159). Throughout this essay she repeats variations and specific terms of that proposition: morality concerns those "promises we make to one another"; "personal conscience" as a measure of morality is actually its antithesis; championing causes may be a diversion from thinking about the difficult problems closer to home.

For Didion readers, this essay is another articulation of a consistent theme in the essays, that is, an attempt to regenerate "wagon train morality" (158), which is an individualism circumscribed by a social context and disciplined by tradition. What Didion abjures is a romantic idea of personal, extemporaneous virtue, the way of "madmen" and murderers, she warns.

> "I followed my own conscience." "I did what I thought was right." How many madmen have said it and meant it? How many murderers? Klaus Fuchs said it, and the men who committed the Mountain Meadows Massacre said it, and Alfred Rosenberg said it. And, as we are rotely and rather presumptuously reminded by those who would say it now, Jesus said it. Maybe we have all said it, and maybe we have been wrong. Except on that most primitive level--our loyalties to those we love--what could be more arrogant than to claim the primacy of personal conscience? (161)

This discursive passage--rather rare in the essay--is followed immediately by a self-deprecating example in which Didion posits a moral world dependent on her own moods. Since most readers have a picture of Didion as a rather neurotic pessimist the example is particularly effective. We know she sees the world at times "as a painting by Hieronymous Bosch" (161), and we do not want the persona of the essays "The White Album" or "Slouching toward Bethlehem" deciding our fate.

Didion's larger exempla in the essay are even more effective, since they evoke the somber mood which underscores the essay's theme. "Wagon Train Morality" is a simple code which pertains only to issues of survival, and, appropriately, Didion's examples are anecdotes from a summer night in Death Valley--the all night vigil of a talc miner with the body of a teenager killed in a car accident, the futile effort by sheriff's deputies to find missing divers. These are examples of "promises we make to one another" not

to abandon our dead to the coyotes or the dark, water of underground pools.

Didion evokes the spirit of Death Valley through her lyric gift for the particular; it is the "lunar country" of 119 degree heat, rattlesnakes, scavenging coyotes, dying Midwesterners at the Faith Community Church singing "Rock of Ages Cleft for Me" and the mysterious pools of hot water which may be linked to underground nuclear testing.

> The widow of one of the drowned boys is over there; she is eighteen, and pregnant, and is said not to leave the hole. The divers go down and come up, and she just stands there and stares into the water. They have been diving for ten days but have found no bottom to the caves, no bodies and no trace of them, only the black 90 water going down and down and down, and a single translucent fish, not classified. The story tonight is that one of the divers has been hauled up incoherent, out of his head, shouting--until they got him out of there so that the widow could not hear--about water that got hotter instead of cooler as he went down, about light flickering through the water, about magma, about underground nuclear testing. (160)

The conscious rhythm of this passage--the repetition of "no," "down," "about"--as well as the dense texture of modifiers are balanced against a homely diction--"she just stands there," "until they got him out of there so that the widow could not hear." The method is the time-honored one of horror stories, in which the everyday is juxtaposed against the mysterious and awful. Didion's voice, characteristically objective, heightens the horror by playing against it. Information about the pathetic wife is given in

the stolid prose of newspaper reporting, and "single translucent fish, not classified" in the diction of a scientific report.

The tone is consistent throughout the essay, which begins in the dramatic mode: "As it happens, I am in Death Valley, in a room at the Enterprise Motel and Trailer Park," she informs her readers without noting the metaphorical significance of that statement. The offhand voice continues as she explains her motive for writing such a portentous essay: The American Scholar asked her to. (Didion's piece is very different from the other contributors to the magazines's forum on morality. She has chosen to present her thoughts dramatically and in concrete terms. This calculated approach is a counterbalance to--and, perhaps a kind of criticism of--the abstract definitions offered by the other participants.)

Didion's off-hand explanation helps to undercut any unpleasant aura of lecturing which might hang over such an essay. Instead, Didion pictures herself as not only coming to the task under the gun of a deadline but uncomfortable and distracted as well:

> I cannot seem to make the air conditioner work, but there is a small refrigerator, and I can wrap ice cubes in a towel and hold them against the small of my back. With the help of the ice cubes I have been trying to think, because The American Scholar asked me to, in some abstract way about "morality," a word I distrust more every day, but my mind veers inflexibly toward the particular. (157)

Like the dark underground pools, a sense of the macabre and sinister underlies this essay. Didion twice mentions nuclear weapons: first in the context of the diving anecdote, and second in a quotation from The Deer Park in which a character looks toward Los Alamos and wishes for the "white dead dawn" to "clear the rot and the stench" (161). Didion, in her Hieronymous Bosch mood, sometimes wishes the same thing, she admits. Is Didion's repeated use of nuclear explosion as metaphor an accident? It is unlikely, given the careful attention lavished on every other element of this essay.

In fact, nuclear disaster is, perhaps, the most important "particular" in the essay, but of such magnitude that Didion wisely alludes to it rather than uses it, as does Lewis Thomas, as the theme of the essay. In defining morality as "survival," Didion prepares the way, with a subtle reminder here and there, for her readers to conclude that nuclear weapons may be the ultimate violation of the "promises we make to one another." This is the unspoken text of the essay, and one which is most powerful because it is unstated. With such subtlety and respect for her audience, Didion's essay achieves what a more overtly persuasive essay could not. Her conclusion, which is also highly patterned and rhythmic, is equivalent to a lyric

refrain, continuing in the mind's ear as a reminder and a source of formal assent:

> When we start deceiving ourselves into thinking not that we want something or need something, not that it is a pragmatic necessity for us to have it, but that it is a **moral imperative** that we have it, then is when we join the fashionable madmen, and then is when the thin whine of hysteria is heard in the land, and then is when we are in bad trouble. And I suspect we are already there. (163)

The ironic tone of "Good Citizens" (WA 86-95) is much lighter than that of "On Morality." Didion uses a triptych of "jump shots" making no effort to bridge between each section. As in "The White Album" and "Slouching toward Bethlehem," the aim of "Good Citizens" is the portrayal of the bulwarks which people erect to make sense of things--the stories they tell themselves. The abrupt shifts from one story to another seem to formally duplicate the disorienting cultural shifts which wash around such fragile bulwarks.

The first section is an acrid description of politics, Hollywood style. Didion depicts the shallowness and naivete of politically active movie makers through anecdote and quotation. Unlike "On Morality," "Good Citizens" contains many general statements--perhaps because the subject is more emotionally manageable.

> The public life of liberal Hollywood comprises a kind of dictatorship of good intentions, a social contract in which actual and irreconcilable disagreement is as taboo as failure or bad teeth, a climate devoid of irony. (86-87)

Because the "climate" is devoid of argument, according to Didion, Hollywood people use the "borrowed rhetoric" of mass rallies to articulate political ideas, chanting "No man is an island" at dinner parties and thinking they are quoting Hemingway (86). Didion's essay is laced with a delicate malice, the sort of attack favored by the new journalists who are such excellent mimics of unguarded conversation. And like Tom Wolfe, for example, Didion seems to have no trouble cornering invitations to the parties she parodies. The central anecdote of this section is a "debate" she witnessed at a Beverly Hills club organized to raise money for Eugene McCarthy's campaign. Didion, characteristically, relates the details of the event with deadpan delivery. The "debate" was an incongruous contest between William Styron and Ossie Davis, the actor.

> It was Mr. Davis' contention that in writing The Confessions of Nat Turner Mr. Styron had encouraged racism ("Nat Turner's love for a white maiden, I feel my country can become psychotic about this"), and it was Mr. Styron's contention that he had not. (David Wolper, who had bought the motion picture rights to Nat Turner, had already made his position clear: "How can anyone protest a book," he had asked in the trade press, "that has withstood the critical test of time since last October?") (87-88)

The subject of the debate, of course, is so much moonshine, an excuse for theatrics: "James Baldwin sat between them, his eyes closed and his head thrown back in understandable but rather theatrical agony" (88). In fact,

their vision of life as a script is Didion's explanation for the almost touching credulity of movie people when confronting social problems. "What we are talking about here is faith in a dramatic convention" (88). Her series of examples to back up this assertion are sharp, funny, and devastating.

> If Budd Schulberg goes into Watts and forms a Writers' Workshop, then "Twenty Young Writers" must emerge from it, because the scenario in question is the familiar one about how the ghetto teems with raw talent and vitality. If the poor people march on Washington and camp out, there to receive bundles of clothes gathered on the Fox lot by Barbra Streisand, then some good must come of it (the script here has a great many dramatic staples, not the least of them a sentimental notion of Washington as an open forum, cf. Mr. Deeds Goes to Washington), and doubts have no place in the story. (88-89)

The next section of the essay is an account of a television crew's filming of Nancy Reagan doing something "ordinary" in the Governor's Mansion. The "ordinary" thing turns out to be Mrs. Reagan's picking flowers in the garden--a pretty scene suggested by the film crew. Most of the section is a transcription of the chatter between Nancy Reagan and the crew. This non-event is even less substantial than the non-debate between Davis and Styron. Didion inserts enough discursive markers to guide the reader to see the inanity of the conversation.

> "Indeed it is," Nancy Reagan said with spirit. Nancy Reagan says almost everything with spirit, perhaps because she was once an actress and has the beginning

> actress's habit of investing even the most casual lines with a good deal more dramatic emphasis than is ordinarily called for on a Tuesday morning on 45th Street in Sacramento. (90)

The closing bit of dialogue in the section is a kind of comic emblem of Didion's views of the fictions of modern life. The newsman in charge encourages Mrs. Reagan to "nip" a rhododendron bud.

> "Let's have a dry run," the cameraman said.
> The newsman looked at him. "In other words, by a dry run, you mean you want her to fake nipping the bud."
> "Fake the nip, yeah," the cameraman said. "Fake the nip." (92)

Didion tells us in "On Keeping a Notebook" (SB 131-141) that she collects such bits of dialogue to remember whole scenes, to recreate a mood. The mood of this section of the essay is mocking amusement, with little undertow of the characteristic Didion pessimism. Sandwiched between the first and last sections, however, it seems a facet of a more serious subject--the delusions, benign and malignant, which we mistake for truths. The last section of "Good Citizens" opens in a darker mood. The rain streaming down the faded, vacant buildings of Santa Monica heightens "the most characteristic Santa Monica effect, that air of dispirited abandon which suggests that the place survives only as illustration of a boom gone bankrupt" (92). In this long opening paragraph, Didion describes the President's Luncheon

at the Jaycee Convention which is being held in Santa Monica. Onstage the New Generation are singing cheerful Disney songs while at the head table a pretty young wife is crying into her napkin and saying over and over "Let someone else eat this slop" (92).

Such a scene is vintage Didion--the woman who is cracking up set against the dutifully "positive" Jaycees. Once again Didion provides an emblem for a fractured society in which those people who live lives "devoid of irony"--Hollywood activists, Governors' wives, Jaycees--must avoid looking at things as they are so that they can keep their places in the script. The essay, which begins light-heartedly, ends on a note of pathos:

> Late one afternoon I sat in the Miramar lobby, watching the rain fall and the steam rise off the heated pool outside and listening to a couple of Jaycees discussing student unrest and whether the "solution" might not lie in on-campus Jaycee groups. I thought about this astonishing notion for a long time. It occurred to me finally that I was listening to a true underground, to the voice of all those who have felt themselves not merely shocked but personally betrayed by recent history. it was supposed to have been their time. It was not. (95)

One of Didion's gifts is her ability to elicit sympathy for unsympathetic subjects. She manages this feat, for example, with the Haight-Asbury hippies in "Slouching toward Bethlehem," the murderess Lucille Maxwell, and, in this essay, with the Jaycees. Didion is good at drawing lines of

association between such exotica and ourselves, the "ordinary" ones.

In "Good Citizens," she reminds us that the "ideas" of the Jaycees are the ideas shared by most people in small towns and some in cities, "ideas shared in an unexamined way even by those who laughed at the Jaycees' boosterism and pancake breakfasts and safe-driving Road-e-os" (93). The notion of "business success as a transcendent ideal," however, had fallen on hard times in the late sixties when she wrote this essay, and the rain-drenched peeling buildings of Santa Monica seems an appropriate spot for a convention honoring those ideas.

Didion's ability to translate common experience into the particular is the lyricist's gift as is her ability to manage language so that the rhythm and sound of the words carry the mood. In the first paragraph of "Good Citizens," she moves effortlessly from the drenching rain outside the convention to the tense scene inside. With her use of anaphora--"It scaled still more paint from the faded hotels . . . .It streamed down the blank windows"--she portrays the relentless rain. With polysyndeton--"keynote banquets and award luncheons and prayer breakfasts and outstanding-young-men-forums"--she represents the determined energy of the Jaycee delegates. And twice, as a kind of frame and refrain, she mentions the "pretty young wife" who is breaking down emotionally. It is an almost perfectly

rendered emblem--as is the stark, primal world of Death Valley--of Didion's notion of a world in which the old values do not work and are, indeed, under constant siege.

When one reads "Good Citizens," "On Morality," and other Didion essays twenty years after their first publication, they seem surprisingly fresh and relevant. The reasons that this is so are external to Didion's vision, on the one hand, and inherent in it, on the other. Contemporary culture is still in disorienting flux, and we have not recaptured the insulated calm of an earlier age. Didion's irony continues to be the best recourse in a world in which traditions and the promises we make each other have tenuous holds. The essays by Didion which emerged from the turbulent sixties and early seventies are not only responses to a specific historical moment, however, but also a statement of an enduring theme: all our meanings are fictions, but some are truer than others.

Conclusion

In reading the lyrical essays of Thomas and Didion we enter the farthest reaches of the reflective-exploratory genre, the steppes of rhetoric and the foothills of poetry. Both writers have the poet's eye for analogy and metaphor and the poet's ear for rhythm and pattern; both depend on a subjective, often self-deprecating voice as an instrument of

their rhetoric; both rely on precisely drawn emblems, enigmas and other exempla to carry the meaning of their moral lessons; both understand the uses of irony in leavening melodrama and posturing. These common traits are an inheritance from the Montaignesque tradition, in which laboring to give the appearance of casual ruminating and offhand storytelling is the stock in trade of essayists as covertly serious about drawing moral conclusion as the more overtly didactic Baconian essayists.

A CONCLUDING ESSAY

(IN THE CONTEMPORARY MANNER)

"I think I'd like to like write about `Hands across America,'" my student tells me. We talk some more about organization and framing and she leaves happy.

I'm not so happy. Teaching freshmen to write essays, writing a dissertation about essays, and writing essays from time to time myself have left me punch drunk. In short, I am wary of essays. Seeing how things work--the kitchen in the restaurant, the motor in the music box--turns ones thoughts from romance to technology.

Essays are everywhere these days--neat little constructions of wit and whimsy in magazines and advertising supplements, on the backs of herbal tea boxes, even on the evening news in the form of "commentaries" by earnest "analysts." As I have said earlier in this dissertation, we are starving for interpretation and essays are attempts to provide a flood wall against the Mississippi of information which threatens to drown us.

But I worry about this trend. My student thinks her essay will capture her experience in Raleigh when she and her roommate joined hands with other sincere people on the state capitol grounds and felt good inside. It might, but

my question is whether or not my sanctioning of such a project is a good idea, and in a larger sense, whether the public's sanctioning of thousands of such projects is a good idea. If essayists are natural born skeptics, then they'd better be skeptical about essays.

Essayists often practice the form as an adjunct to something else--Paul Fussell, and Lewis Thomas are academic scholars; Paul Theroux, Joan Didion, and Calvin Trillin are journalists and fiction writers. They bring to their essays a store of knowledge and borrowed techniques. Often, too, essayists are people who have tried writing long and discovered they do better writing short. And they have a steady audience; many people these days read short. The greatest advantage of the contemporary essay as a genre is its brevity, a characteristic, by the way, which is not part of the legacy of Montaigne, whose essays sometimes run to thirty or more pages.

My worry concerns this "advantage." What is happening to the long thoughts that are being pushed aside by reading and writing short? Of course, a good deal of reflection lies behind such a provocative essay as "Slouching towards Bethlehem," and the ideas suggested should inspire a reader's lengthy contemplation, as well. But these thoughts are articulated in the shorthand of the lyrical essayist--not staked out and dissected. Such is the persuasive way of the essay, to suggest rather than to

insist. Even the essayists who follow the plain-speaking Bacon charm their audiences with witty allusions and narratives, rather than categories and reasons.

Perhaps the essay has spoiled us, so that we insist on charm and ease in everything. In 1987 we find a polemicist like George Will using example and dialogue more often than cold-blooded deliberation to carry his point. We find Paul Fussell softening his acerbic literary analyses with personal anecdotes. And I find more and more students who are impatient with and confused by anything but the inviting prose of the reflective essayist.

"Boring," they say of Conrad or Hawthorne.

"You can't understand it," they complain of The Federalist Papers or even "The Declaration of Independence."

Often, instead of burdening them with more "hard" thought, we give them the easily digested essays of E.B. White and tell them to emulate him. White, however--and Fussell, Theroux, Will, Trillin, Orwell--learned their craft not by studying each other, but by reading first the "hard" things. Sometimes I wonder if we are making people dumber by giving them the top of the heap instead of the bottom. And sometimes I visualize the whole of serious, difficult discourse flowing toward the warm sea of subjectivity and simple plots.

That is what I think when I worry about the essay--usu-

ally when I've just read a particularly silly student essay or had one of my own rejected.

On the other hand (the essayist's motto), even in these dark moments, I know not only that many essayists have written at length about difficult matters but also that the essay form itself is invaluable in this age of confusion. The essay, just as in the Renaissance, provides a well wrought urn for rhetorical discourse, the sort of discourse fostered by and necessary in unpredictable times.

And I know another good thing about the essay. Not only has it influenced more stolid deliberation, it has also influenced literature. If one accepts Tom Wolfe's contention that many contemporary fiction writers have abandoned realism, to our sorrow, then the influence of the essay on literature is a happy development.

I offer as evidence the strange and phenomenal success of Garrison Keillor whose hybrid essay/stories represent, I think, a new shift in fiction, and, perhaps, a reconnection with realism--and rhetoric. Calvin Trillin, who writes brilliantly funny essay/stories himself, told me once that he believes Keillor is a genius of a singular kind, one who dreams up plots as he goes along--plots with a point. His "News from Lake Wobegon" on his radio program, A Prairie Home Companion, is a free-fall act, the oral equivalent of composing an essay, but with the disadvantage of no revision.

In 1985, Keillor published Lake Wobegon Days, a collection of stories, many of which had first appeared in oral form on his radio program. The book was a wildly improbable success, remaining week after week on The New York Times Bestseller List. What was going on here? The stories are moralistic, grounded in an unmistakable, but tolerant, version of the Midwestern ethic, and contrary to Fussell's dry opinion that no one these days will sit still for an undisguised ethical essay, people were not only buying multiple copies of the book but listening to variations of the same moral stories on Saturday night.

Keillor's comic gift as well as his ability to create recognizable characters are the staples of his sermonic stories. Just as Theroux's travelogues and Thomas's biology lessons are the trappings for their moral essays, so too are Keillor's familiar cast of middle-class, middle Americans in Lake Woebegon.

The stories seem to tap deep underground streams of shared memories and values. As Didion notes in "Good Citizens," the small-town ethic lies in the near-background of almost every American; when Keillor tells stories of Dorothy at The Chatterbox Cafe, or Ralph at Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, or Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Catholic Church, or the always losing Lake Wobegon Whippets, his audiences recognize themselves and the familiar, secure, and oppressive life of a small town. Nevertheless, small

town life is disappearing, and Keillor's stories evoke both recognition and nostalgia for the old traditions, the old "wagon train morality" we once shared.

The stories are a source not only of moral lessons but of cohesion as well. The latter is a surprise, since a commonplace these days is that our culture is so diverse and fragmented that there are not many sources of community that we share or even remember. In fact, that is the ideology of those who say that rhetoric in the classical sense is impossible. But Keillor proves every Saturday night that the "community" still exists. One portion of each week's show is his reading of messages written by listeners to each other. When you hear these funny, corny messages--"To Grandmother on her ninetieth birthday," "To Barbara: please return yourself or my typewriter"--you feel an unexpected sense of exhilaration. Maybe things are not so strange after all.

Surprising too, and more related to this study, is the fact that the fictional dimension of the Lake Woebegon stories is transparent. Keillor has formed a cheerfully casual pact with his audience: we will pretend together that this place exists, and part of the fun is knowing all the time that it doesn't. Certainly, it is a different sort of pact than one makes with a writer like Faulkner: the texture of the fictional Yoknapatawpha County is so deep that we must wade right in without thinking of the shore.

Keillor, however, consistently gives us our bearings; "Just because these people are fictional doesn't mean they don't have feelings," he says from time to time. If people are seduced by Keillor's story line into taking their moral medicine, then the seduction is much more forthright than that of the travel essayist or book reviewer. In Keillor's Lake Wobegon stories, rhetoric is as obvious as the story.

Keillor's career is an interesting contrast to other essayists who began as something else. He began as an essayist, and still writes essays of the more recognizable form from time to time. But his amazing success with the Lake Woebegon stories suggests another direction for the essay. If the association of the essay and deliberation is sometimes contemptibly familiar, the association of the essay and literature is not. The spirit of the essay--its rhetorical point and clarity--could entice some "untrained" readers back to serious fiction.

This is what I think when I am feeling good about the essay, when I have listened to A Prairie Home Companion or read a thoughtful student paper or finished a dissertation. And at those moments I am willing to think even about "Hands across America."

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