

Personal Essay/Informal Essay
Fr. Philip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay*

Several years ago I went back to Lopate's book (above), reread his intro (he's the editor), and lifted the following out—and I thought I'd share. I reread these notes once in a while, to remind me how little progress I've made in my own quest to write a personal essay. It's more difficult than you might think.

Elements of the personal essay: self-revelation; individual tastes and personal experiences; confidential manner; humor, graceful style, rambling structure, unconventionality/novelty of theme, freshness of form, freedom from stiffness and affectation, incomplete or tentative treatment of topic.

Personal essay essayists converse with the reader because they are already having dialogues and disputes with themselves.

The personal essay is [a] struggle for honesty, which is rarely achieved, due to the fact that we are self-deceiving, rationalizing animals.

Often the "plot" of the personal essay consists in watching how far the essayist can drop past his psychic defenses.

Montaigne: "We must remove the mask."

Unproblematically self-assured, self-contained, self-satisfied [individuals] will not make good essayists.

Personal essays reveal habits of thought.

Personal essayists are adept at interrogating their ignorance.

Also common to the genre is a taste for littleness. Horace: "The gods have done well in making me a humble and small-spirited fellow." Abraham Cowley: "I confess I love littleness almost in all things. A little convenient estate, a little cheerful house, a little company, and a little feast...." In exchange for lack of stature or power in the world, the personal essayist claims unique access to the small, humble things in life.

The personal essay tilts toward the comic.

The personal essay is a harvesting of self-contradiction.

The personal essayist must assume he has never been read before and so must reestablish a personal essay each time and embed it in a context by providing sufficient autobiographical background.

The personal essay form allows the writer to circle around one particular autobiographical piece. The personal essayist may be more temperamentally suited to this circling procedure, diving into the volcano of self and extracting a single hot coal to consider.

Personal essayists often go against the grain of popular opinion. They raise the ante, making it more difficult for the reader to identify frictionlessly with the writer.

Personal essayists must be ready to pass judgment or their work will be toothless.

It is in egotism, this personal reference to the self, in which the charm of the essayist resides.

The amused observation of one's own self is a veritable gold mine whose surface has hardly yet been scratched.

Cheekiness is a way of keeping readers alert. It cuts through the pious and commonplace.

Beerbohm: "M. Bergson, in his well-known essay on the theme, says...well, he says many things; but none of these, though I have just read them, do I clearly remember, nor am I sure that in the act of reading them, do I understand any of them."

Montaigne, "*Of the education of children*": "...I know that there is such a thing as medicine, jurisprudence, four parts in mathematics, and roughly what they aim at. And perhaps I also know the service that the sciences in general aim to contribute to our life. But as for plunging in deeper, or gnawing my nails over the study of Aristotle, monarch of modern learning, or stubbornly pursuing some part of knowledge, I have never done it; nor is there an art which I could sketch even in the outlines."

Part of what gives the personal essayists the license to be so cheeky is their suspicion that they are not performing in the central ring of the literary circus...they are second-class citizens.

E.B. White: "A writer who has his sights trained on the Nobel Prize or other earthly triumphs had best write a novel, a poem, or a play, and leave the essayist to ramble about, content with living a free life and enjoying the satisfaction of somewhat undisciplined existence."

Personal essayists frequently represent themselves as loafers or retirees, inactive and tangential to the marketplace.

Sir Richard Steel: "It is an inexpressible pleasure to know a little of the world and be of no character or significance in it."

Fiction's "unreliable narrator" may have derived initially from the mischievous candor and first-person expressiveness unleashed in personal essays.

...the past is an Aladdin's lamp which he (the personal essayist) never tires of rubbing.

The past comes loose in disconnected fragments.

The personal essay is the voice of middle age because it is the fruit of ripened experience; with middle age comes a taste for equilibrium, unnerving calm.

Gore Vidal: "the true confessors have been aware that not only is life mostly failure, but that in one's failure or pettiness or wrongness exists the living drama of the self."

Montaigne: "all subjects are limited to each other" by free association.

The personal essay has an "unmethodical method."

Dr. Johnson: "a loose sally of the mind" and "an irregular, undigested piece"

Eduardo Nicol (Spanish philosopher), concerning the personal essay: "*almost* literature and *almost* philosophy:

The well-made short story has a recognizable arc that seems built into the genre, whereas even an [personal] essay that is "well made" seems to follow a more intuitive, groping path. The writer of the poorest sonnet is assured that in the end there will be a fourteen-line poem, whereas the [personal] essayist may be left with nothing more than a set of fragmentary notes.

The personal essayist attempts to surround a something—a subject, a mood, a problematic irritation—by coming at it from all angles.

The essayist must be a good storyteller. Yet the essayist happily violates the number one rule of short story workshops, "Show, don't tell"; the glory of the [personal] essayist is to tell, once and for all, everything he or she thinks, knows, and understands.

The stated subject or title of a piece may be only its pretext.

Many times the personal essayist will start to explore a subject, then set upon a counter-theme, and eventually braid the two.

Personal essayists make use of the digression (see *Tristram Shandy*).

Another formal technique employed by the personal essayist is the movement from the individual to the universal.

Montaigne was a compulsive sprinkler of citations, and he cheerfully claimed he was doing it to get a free ride on other men's brains.

The personal essay has always striven for the ideal of "light learning"...it has always distanced itself from the scholarly treatise.

The personal essay is written to "the common reader," that happy, somewhat fuzzy figure who may or may not exist but who has been solicited to partake.

The personal essay is research on the self.

Montaigne: called himself a new type, an "accidental philosopher," expressing the hope that his impromptu approach—seemingly opposite of traditional (systemic) philosophy—might almost by chance add up to a philosophy.

Adorno: saw the rich, subversive possibilities in the "anti-systematic" properties of the essay; "luck and play" are what are essential to the essay; it says what is at issue and stops where it feels itself complete.

A virtue of fragmentation, offering it as a mirror to the unconnectable, archipelago-like nature of modern life, making the transitory eternal (Adorno).

Personal essayists often end up contradicting themselves.

Keats: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function."

The personal essay not only monitors the self but helps it gel.

Montaigne, recognizing that human beings were surrounded by darkness, with nothing particularly solid to cling to, led to a philosophical acceptance that one has to make oneself up from moment to moment.

The reader must find you amusing; but this will only happen if you yourself are amused.

The art of characterization comes down to establishing a pattern of habits and actions for the person you are writing about and introducing variations into the system. In this respect, building a character is a pedagogic model, because you are teaching the reader what to expect.

How to turn oneself into a character:

- Acquire some distance from yourself (hover); be balanced (not always speaking of oneself in a negative light)
- Might start with quirks; idiosyncrasies; stubborn tics, antisocial mannerisms
- Don't try to be likable or nice
- Cut away the inessentials, highlighting just those features in your personality that lead to the most intense contradictions or ambivalences

Cynthia Ozick: The essay needs conflict, just as the short story does. The essay is a thing of the imagination. If there is information in an essay, it is by-the-by, and if there is an opinion, one need not trust it for the long run. A genuine essay rarely has an educational, polemical, or sociopolitical use; it is the movement of a free mind at play. Though it is written in prose, it is closer in kind to poetry than to any other form. Like a poem, a genuine essay is made of language and character and mood and temperament and pluck and chance. What gives the essay its dynamism is the need to work out some problem.

Cynthia Ozick: Or, to put it more stringently: an essay, like a story or a novel, is a fiction. A fiction, by definition, is that which is made up in response to an excited imagination. What is fictitious about the essay is that it is pretending not to be made up – so that reading an essay may be more dangerous than reading a story. This very foreword, for instance, may count as a little essay: ought it to be trusted? (Remember the Cretan captured by Greeks. Questioned, he replied: “All Cretans are liars.” Was this a truthful confession, or only another sample of a Cretan lying? After all, even Tolstoy, whom we think of as the quintessential novelist, was a kind of Cretan. First he wrote *Anna Karenina*; then he wrote “What Is Art?” – condemning the writing of novels. Which Tolstoy should we believe?)

The point is not that essays are untrustworthy. Obviously, an essay will fail if it is not intellectually coherent, if it does not strike you as authentic (ideas must be earned, not merely learned), if it is not felt to be reliably truth-telling. An essay must show all these indispensable signs of consonance and conscience – but only for the duration of its reading, or a bit longer. If its “authenticity” is compelled to last much beyond that, the reader will be tying the writer down by small stakes and long strings, like Gulliver; and no essayist (except maybe a Gibbon or a Montaigne – certainly no contemporary essayist) is as big as that. In other words, if a writer of stories is also a writer of essays, the essays ought not to be seized as a rod to beat the writer's stories with; or as a frame into which to squeeze the writer's stories; or, collectively, as a “philosophy” into which to pen the writer's outlook.

Does all this mean that virtually no essay can have an enduring probity? Well, if a story can be empowered with constancy and incorruptibility, so can an essay; but only in the same way, contingent on its immanent logic or marrow-song. No story, and no essay, has the practical capacity to act itself out in the world; or ought to. All the same, if it seems that I am denying plausible truth-telling to the essays in this book, or that I don't want them to represent me, it isn't

so: each, little or long, was pressed out in a mania of (ad hoc, occasional, circumstantial)
conviction: the juncture – as in any fiction – of predicament and nerve.