Occasional Papers on the Essay: Practice & Form

On Teaching the Essay

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Welcome Table Press Press
Pamphlet Series

October 2010

The Welcome Table Press *Occasional Paper Series on Practice & Form* derives from talks delivered at In Praise of the Essay: Practice & Form, a biannual symposium co-sponsored by Welcome Table Press and Fordham University's English Department & Creative Writing Program.

These talks were presented at the April 24, 2010 symposium.

Welcome Table Press is a nonprofit, independent press dedicated to publishing and celebrating the essay, in all its forms.

Editors:
Kim Dana Kupperman
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Printed on 100% post-consumer waste, acid-free recycled paper, this is #_____ of an edition of 120. Hand folded and hand sewn with linen thread by volunteers in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

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On Teaching the Essay

Fractal Form: On Learning to Read Again

Paul Lisicky

I.

Say *structure* in a writing workshop or, worse, "How is this structured?" and feel the shudder through the room. Eyes look everywhere but down at the page. Do you remember feeling like that? Do you remember holding back the shudder as you tensed in your seat? You were no longer in the realm of mystery and the tumult of your thoughts and feelings but some place dutiful. The word hung high above your head. It had a hammer in it. It made you feel smaller. It reminded you that there was a lot you didn't know, a lot you'd never know. Maybe you didn't even want to know what you didn't know. Wasn't it better to lie on the beach, or walk through the woods, or climb mountains on the page, than to think about matters like that? Even the sound of the word: *structure*. Didn't it sound like *stricture*, *suture*, *rupture*—something that wanted to tear a wound across the page? Here you'd come so far. Here you'd come to the point where you reclaimed language as music, and now maybe you were back to the stuff of topic sentences and *themes* and all the ugly banality of comp classes.

As for all the other words used to talk about style, or the elements of language characterizing an author's way of seeing—description, meaning, sound, vision? Well, there was a little less of the hammer in them, but not much less.

II.

From an interview with Tao Lin, in response to being asked what kind of reader he is:

> I'm not sure if I'm a speedy reader. Sometimes it feels like I'm reading "really fast," and it seems weird, like I'm "flying" sort of, or watching a movie, having somehow "bypassed" the awareness of "processing the words," therefore only experiencing a continuous reality of images and emotions as I stare at the page. Might be what people call "speed reading."

III.

I say to myself, I don't think you should be too proud of reading that way. I say, you give us the chance to put on our superior face. I say, say that half the pleasure of reading is thinking about how the sentence is built, how an image, or two, is hammered into the sound. But my students, whether they're grad students or undergrads, aren't they all reading under duress? How do they have time to consider—what? figuration?—when they're expected to read hundreds of pages a week? (And we're not even getting to reading Tweets or Facebook posts, or all the wonders inside the smart phone.) I, of course, shudder when I hear my student say, without a lick of irony, "I don't want to have to work hard as a reader." But let's be honest. Didn't I read that two-hundred-page memoir this past Sunday morning inside two hours? Didn't I feel like I was "flying, sort of," only catching a vague sense of patterns along the way? I knew that there was another way—okay, a better way—to read the book, and maybe I will go back to read that book when I am not twelve days from the end of the semester.

Three days from the end of the semester. And now I'm wondering about that student who runs off to work after class, reading her homework as the train shakes and sways toward Carroll Gardens. Doesn't she read and write under those conditions all the time?

IV.

How to teach each other to read another way? How else to write the work we really want to write? Work as weird and animated as the music we love, but in command of its patterns and habits. By this I mean work that might be meaningful to the reader.

V.

In *Feeling as a Foreign Language*, poet Alice Fulton writes that the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot observed that:

> Twenty-five or thirty years ago, science looked at things that were regular and smooth. In contrast, he became intrigued by what are called chaotic phenomena: the occurrence of earthquakes; the way our neurons fire when we search our memories. He found that certain chaotic structures…contained a deep logic or pattern. In 1975,

> he coined the word *fractals* (from the Latin *fractus*, meaning "irregular or fragmented") to describe such configurations.

VI.

"To put it simply, each part of a fractal form replicates the form of the entire structure. Increasing detail is revealed with increasing magnification, and each smaller part looks like the entire structure, turned around or tilted a bit. The bark patterns on oak, mud cracks in a dry riverbed, a broccoli spear—these are examples of fractal forms: irregular structures containing just enough regularity so that they can be described."

VII.

"Mandelbrot's discoveries could change the way we look at the world. Certainly the discovery of order within the turbulent forms of nature should encourage us to search for patterns within the turbulent forms of art."

VIII.

How is any of this is relevant to teaching the essay? Or to the larger project, teaching one another to be appreciators, attuned to quirks of thought and expression? A paragraph from "An Anthropology of Water," in Anne Carson's *Plainwater:*

> Stars are spinning out of the Cathedral as we enter Compostela: the cathedral! No it is not a mirage, this stupendous humming hulk of gold that stands as if run aground upon the plaza at the center of the city of Santiago. Built in the early years of the twelfth century, it was embellished toward the end of that century by one Master Mateo, who added the Portal of Glory to replace the original entrance. That was an act of grace. An entrance is important to a pilgrim, there can be only one.

How to say what we see, in no particular order? Here's a little of what we might come up with:

1. She chooses to set off the phrase "the cathedral" with colon and exclamation point. Hasn't she already mentioned the cathedral in that sentence? Now, if I put that up in a writing workshop…(Class laughs).

2. I see a contrast between the multiple stars in the opening, and

the insistent "there can be only one." Maybe there's a pattern in the piece, a tension between the one and the many. I wonder if the other paragraphs keep making patterns like that.

3. She prefers the one and two-syllable words to longer, Latinate words. Think *stupendous* and how it pushes up against *humming hulk*, which practically takes delight in pure sound.

4. Why "one" Master Mateo? How would the meaning of that sentence shift without *one*? Could that sentence be poking fun at the diction of travel writing?

5. The one-syllable words of the sentence "That was an act of grace" intensify its effect.

6. And that last sentence—such certainty in a writer who's usually so open to ambivalence! Can that suggest a little about what the larger trajectory: a quest for answers? Maybe sometimes the questions aren't enough.

IX.

And, over the course of fifteen or twenty minutes we keep talking like that. We look at the room and see how it is built. No certainties, no pronouncements. No wrong answers. Questions are enough. We look at the room's tiles and doorknobs. We look at the way the sun hits the floor planks. We hold it in our hands, turn it around and tilt it a bit. We might say, "I want to build a room like that." And maybe that room tells us something about the whole house enclosing it.

X.

Isn't that what we've been wanting? To slow down, to concentrate, to go over something over and over? To be still. To know the skin underneath our shirts and socks again. To feel thoughts humming inside our brains. To be reminded that smell and taste and texture are necessary. Back to our animal selves: looking right and left, to see what might be coming at us from the other side of the trees.

XI.

And back to Tao Lin:

> ["Speed reading"] happens rarely. I like to read lying on my stomach on my bed, "leveraging" my upper body and head with my elbows and maybe forearms. I like to read sitting in sunlight in warm weather.

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Note: Sections VI and VII contain direct quotes by Alice Fulton from her book *Feeling as a Foreign Language*.

Teaching the Essay

Mimi Schwartz

I always try to teach the essay in the opposite way that I was taught as a freshman at the University of Michigan in the late 1950s. The message I got then was that essays are for the mind. You decipher, you analyze, and, after much hard work, you are enlightened on familiar subjects such as "On Books" (Montaigne) and "Walking" (Thoreau). But with these authors, and others, I felt no sense of intimacy, which Phillip Lopate says, "is the hallmark of the personal and familiar essay." Partly, the problem was the language—it wasn't mine. As a seventeen-year-old girl from New York, I loved to read and liked to walk, but I could not identify with efforts to lure me in to intimacy with observations such as:

> I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*: which word is beautifully derived "from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going, a la Sainte Terre, to the Holy Land."

We walkers—Thoreau and I—were not yet on the same trail. But because I loved literature, we hooked up, happily, in my sophomore American lit course and have sauntered together ever since. But I suspect that those fellow classmates who never took another English course heard the word *essay* and probably sat up straighter but avoided the genre from then on. Which is why when you go to Amazon.com and type in *essay collections*, the search engine finds *Essays That Will Get You Into Medical School, Essays of Warren Buffett: Lessons from Corporate America*, and *50 Successful Harvard Application Essays.* Literary essays are a very hard sell, even for the already famous.

Two other problems blocked the intimacy of essays for me back in college. One was that almost everyone we read was long dead. Even the recently dead had trouble gaining entrée into my U of M classroom. The second problem was that every essayist was male. I don't recall

reading a female essayist until graduate school—or beyond. So although I felt proud to master the masters, and to write analytic essays proving that I could, I felt no strong personal connection beyond academia.

With that kind of past, is it any wonder that a favorite teaching essay of mine, always used early in a course, is Nora Ephron's "A Few Words about Breasts"? She's alive, she's a woman, and she hits literally near the gut, inviting what Lopate calls "a drive towards candor and self-disclosure" that makes *essay* into a wonderful word for students, particularly those with no pre-existing commitment to "literature." I say early on because we do tackle Montaigne and Thoreau, but only after the essay already means something good, something relevant, something with the power to connect with young people, here and now.

When we read Ephron's essay, the girls tend to come to class elated. They say, "Oh my God, that's just what happened to me," or "I was flat as a board until I was fifteen," or "I had just the opposite problem; I was huge by fifth grade."

The boys usually sit with arms crossed, silent, until I challenge them: Doesn't anyone have a sister? Didn't anyone's voice change in puberty? Stares, shuffles, someone eventually opens up. Occasionally I'll have a Harry. Harry was eighty, auditing my creative nonfiction course, and he said, "Oh yeah, when I got hair on my balls, that *was* a big deal." Everyone's jaw dropped. Harry could have been their grandfather, even their great-grandfather, and he was talking about *his balls*? There were a few giggles, a few nods from the guys, then laughter, and after that I had nothing more to do for the whole semester. People said what they felt and wrote what they felt, all thanks to Ephron's essay, and a little help from Harry.

Other essays have had equally powerful effects on students: Scott Russell Sanders's "Under the Influence" and Gerald Callahan's "Chimera" are two that almost always galvanize my classes. Sanders's essay, which begins with his father's alcoholism and its legacy on him and his family, makes my students pay close attention. They know about binge drinking and face it around them, whatever their family legacy. Sanders, more than Ephron, puts his personal story into a larger socio-political context, something I encourage students to admire and emulate when they write essays about their family legacies. And his "researched" list of synonyms for *drunk*, beginning with "tipsy, tight, pickled, souse,

and plowed; stone and stewed, lubricated and inebriated, juiced and sliced," inspires them with new possibilities for research. And for *not* writing in complete sentences!

Teaching Gerald Callahan's essay "Chimera"—about how the body's memories are stored not only in the brain but also in the immune system—always surprises me. It's a difficult essay conceptually, less accessible than the others, yet even weaker students read it carefully, often more than once. Why? Because, they tell me, it explains why they can't forget their boyfriend or think they see someone that they know has left their lives. Callahan's essay is full of science, but from the beginning, a real person weaves through it:

> Last Thursday, one of those gray fall days when the starlings gather up and string between the elms around here, my children's mother—dead ten years—walked into a pastry shop where I was buttering a croissant. She ignored me, which she always does, ordered a plain bagel and an almond latte, picked up her food, and without a glance at me, walked out.

A little further on he talks about how "Most of us don't for a moment associate immune systems with hopes and fears, emotions and recollections, we don't imagine that anything other than lymph—the pale liquid gathered from the blood—is stored inside the thymuses, spleens, and lymph nodes." He could lose us in the technical, but then he pulls the threads together: "And the memories stored inside our immune systems come back, like my first wife, at unexpected moments, with sometimes startling consequences." And so it goes, all through the essay.

As readers we focus first on what he is saying. But then we shift hats and read as writers, focusing on how Callahan does it, how, seamlessly, he makes the personal and the scientific, the objective and the subjective, all work together. We study the craft of being both informational and engaging, and then we try it.

That brings me to the final thing I want to say about teaching the essay today: it can be a powerful model for writers. At writers workshops, I always read sections of essays to illustrate possibilities, as I just did with Callahan's opening. I make three- to four-page packets of essay excerpts, usually beginnings. Whatever the subject—finding voice, getting started, writing about nature—these excerpts do wonders for revealing

the writer's craft: clarifying points, inspiring new approaches to form and content, and generally giving everyone permission to try something new.

In the U of M freshman comp classes, we might have written one token personal essay, but the rest were analytical essays about essays. Not the five-paragraph miseries we wrote in high school (another reason for the essay's bad rap), but definitely no "I," please. A hundred years before, Darwin could write in *The Origin of the Species,* "Believing that it is always best to study some special group, I have, after deliberation, taken up domestic pigeons. I have kept every breed which I could purchase or obtain." If we tried this we would get a comment like, "Why do we need to know about your pigeons. You are writing about evolution, remember?" And if we wrote "I think" or "I like," we would get in the margins, "Never use I!" The message: no personal voice, no "I" interacting with the text, no effort to establish a rapport with the reader.

I don't think things have changed much in many classrooms.

And that's the problem, because the best way to teach and celebrate the essay today is to encourage college freshmen, as well as advanced writing students, to write more essays with voice, heart, and intellect, whether writing about their lives, about the world they live in, or about what they read and how they experience those readings. When readers of essays also write them, when the rhetorical divide between the personal and analytic essay narrows and blurs, then the word *essay*, meaning to try, to speculate, and by extension, to wonder, will regain its lost status and again become a grand way for one voice to encourage another to speak about the world we are all trying to figure out.

Note:
The essays cited, except for one by Thoreau, can be found in *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*, by Mimi Schwartz and Sondra Perl.

Annotations: An Inside-Out Approach to Reading Like A Writer

Michael Steinberg

I.

When I was teaching at a writer's conference a couple of summers ago, I witnessed the following scenario: After his reading, the poet Gerald Stern was conducting a Q and A. Someone in the audience asked, "How does your reading influence your writing?" It's the kind of benign, well-intentioned question that writers often have to field in public forums. Stern paused for a long beat and then, partly tongue-in-cheek, said, "All writers are full-time readers. That's our job description. When we have some free time, we write."

This is, in fact, a pretty accurate description that goes right to the heart of what practicing writers do. And when I talk about and teach writing, it's always where I start.

As a writer, a teacher, a reader, and a responder to other writers' work, the most valuable advice and feedback I can offer are strictly about matters of craft. An acute awareness of craft is, in good part, the result of learning how to read like a writer.

II.

Reading like a writer isn't the same thing as reading like a critic, which is of course the way most of us, especially those who were English majors, have been taught. For the most part, we've been trained to abstract themes, symbols, and ideas from literary texts at the expense of learning to identify and better understand the ways in which those literary texts were made. It's the difference between explication and process. Here's a quote from Margot Livesey that I like a lot:

> Read everything that is good for the good of your soul. Then, learn to read as a writer, to search out that hidden machinery which it is the business of art to conceal and the business of the apprentice to comprehend. Read work that is less than good, work in progress, to see that machinery

> more clearly. Learn to read your work as if it were the work of another. Admit your judgments. We know our strengths and weaknesses, even when we strive not to.

I want to explore what Livesey means by the "hidden machinery which it is the business of art to conceal and the business of the apprentice to comprehend." And by "apprentice" I include experienced as well as novice writers.

III.

I've found that those who can read like writers intuitively know how to apply what they're learning from their reading to their own developing craft as writers. Let me be more specific. The single reading strategy I'll discuss today is what a lot of teaching writers in low-residency MFA programs refer to as "annotations."

Annotation, I know, is a somewhat misleading noun. So much so that my own MFA program has substituted the term *craft analysis*. Some people think of annotation as in an annotated bibliography, for example. Then, there's the definition that Kim Dana Kupperman wrote about in a talk she gave a year ago at AWP:

> The annotation, as I understand it, is an encapsulated summary of a work, factual and true to the text, but not necessarily entirely objective. The verb *to annotate* means to furnish with notes; it derives from the Latin *nota*, or mark.

I, on the other hand, look at annotations in quite another way. But no matter what we're calling it, I teach and talk about annotations as personal/critical interpretations of whatever literary selections my students have chosen to read. What annotations needn't be are rigorous literary critical essays, plot summaries, or book reviews. What they ideally can be are clear and coherent, informal, and yet in-depth, examinations that reflect our thoughts and impressions—in the context of reading like a writer, as opposed to reading like a critic, or even reading like an appreciative reader.

In other words, the purpose of annotations is to help us recognize specific strategies and identify a variety of approaches that literary writers utilize in crafting their work—strategies, ideally, that we can adapt to

our own works in progress. And I can't stress the second part of that connection enough.

Whether it's an undergraduate class or a low-residency or academic MFA program, this is how I generally explain annotations to my students. Instead of asking them to them to analyze elements like theme, point of view, symbol, or motif, I encourage students to look at the works they're reading from the point of view of how they were made.

IV.

To get students out of their literary-critical heads, I suggest they try writing their annotations informally in the first person, just as they would if they were writing a personal essay or, perhaps, a less-than-formal personal/critical essay.

I teach creative nonfiction workshops, which means that my students are reading and annotating works by personal essayists, memoirists, literary journalists, and cultural critics. But whatever they're reading—and I'll stress this again—I always want them to be speculating, asking why something does (or doesn't) work, and how that discovery might apply to their own developing works in progress. Often, I've found that they can manage the first task but have difficulties doing the second. Here are some general suggestions I offer them:

1. What do you think the writer's overall intent is in this selection? In support of that intention, cite a few craft-related examples such as how the use of persona, voice, language, and especially structure, convey (or fail to convey) the writer's intent. (Note: The writer's intent or the impulse behind the work is not a subject, idea, or theme. Nor does the intent necessarily have to exist before one begins the writing. This will sound like a contradiction, but in the best-case scenario, the writer will discover his or her intent through the composing process itself.)

2. Keeping the focus on craft, choose a writer whose work is comparable to your own. Given the writer's intent, ask yourself what specific strategies and approaches you can adapt (or steal). Whenever you can, cite specific examples of how and in what ways the writer utilizes these strategies, and how and in what ways they can serve your own work. Then do the same thing with a writer whose work is much different from your own. What similarities, if any, do the writers have in common?

3. Another way to look at this is to compare the selection you are now reading to others you have recently read. Give a few examples of specific craft strategies that serve the writers' intent. Consider how these particular strategies can benefit your own work in progress.

Here are a few other, more focused strategies and approaches:

1. After reading a given selection, go back and examine each paragraph more carefully.

2. Next to the paragraph you're reading, write down some notes and impressions that simply describe the writer's intent. Then, write similar paragraph-by-paragraph margin notes on your own drafts in progress. (Note another paradox here. During writing workshop, students are still in the process of drafting and revising their work. But they're being asked to read and annotate already finished, published texts. A final question might be how looking at a finished work can help us with our own works in progress.)

3. Compare the selection you're now reading to others you've recently read. Give specific examples of common strategies between the two, strategies that can benefit your own work in progress.

4. After you've read a given selection, quickly write down your thoughts and speculations about things like controlling idea, theme, symbol, and motifs. Put those notes aside. Next, reread the piece and write craft notes that focus only on how the piece was written. Using whatever you need from both sets of notes, write your annotation. This exercise will help you balance your analytical/critical responses with your personal/critical impressions. Adapt it however you'd like.

Annotations are by no means the only craft strategy for learning to read like a writer; I have included several other suggestions. But because annotations get readers to think about the connections between what they're reading and what they're currently writing, this is an especially good place to start.

Let the Great World In: The Personal Essay, Rita Hayworth's Zipper, and Mickey Mouse's Ears

Elizabeth Stone

As we've seen, the essay has infinite variety in both form and content, so today I want to say a few words about the stuff of daily life—call it topical material—and the ways it can make itself felt in the personal essay.

Topical references, I should add, have generally not been seen as enhancing an essay's literary stature. The year Cynthia Ozick guest edited *Best American Essays*, she noted in her introduction that while the essay was about "reflection and insight," a piece of writing with a topical focus wasn't an essay but an "article" with "the temporary advantage of social heat." Susan Sontag, in her guest introduction, wasn't quite so severe in her judgments, but she did distinguish between essays about "being old and falling in love and the nature of poetry" on the one hand, and "Rita Hayworth's zipper and Mickey Mouse's ears" on the other. Or vice versa, for that matter. But Sontag also knew that "The perennial now comes in the guise of the topical," and that while "essays end up in books…they start their lives in magazines." And in fact the classic personal essays I'll discuss today all first appeared in monthly magazines.

Magazines. When I was a student one of the most interesting things I ever learned, and have been thinking about ever since, is that technology begets genre. As in no printing press, no novel. Even how often a magazine hits the stands can inform the nature of the essays it publishes, which is why I suspect essays that appear in weekly or monthly magazines are more in thrall to the topical than those in publications coming out quarterly. This mass-market tropism in the direction of topicality, of letting the great world in, has been true, at least in this country, since Mark Twain published a good chunk of his "Life on the Mississippi" in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the early 1880s; they appeared as personal travel essays, which are almost always topical. Wrote Twain in a sample: "We picked up one excellent word—a word worth traveling to New Orleans to get: a nice limber, expressive, handy word—

Lagniappe," which, he wrote, "originated in the Spanish quarter of the city…They pronounce it lanny-yap…it is the equivalent of the thirteenth roll in a 'baker's dozen.' It is something thrown in gratis." A storekeeper might offer a piece of licorice to a child, a spool of thread to a servant. And for the governor? "I don't know what he gives the governer; support, likely."

"Life on the Mississippi" has survived while other such essays have not, which is to say that a personal essay written today about today may well not last beyond tomorrow. But one written today with the sharp topical details of yesterday in mind may achieve longevity, perhaps surviving because it either challenges or reaffirms how we understand our cultural landscape. So maybe Rita Hayworth's zipper is no big deal, but for Gerald Early, the Miss America Pageant certainly is. You could even say—do you see what's coming?—that it's an essay with…legs. (Early's essay, "Life with Daughters: Watching the Miss America Pageant," first appeared in *Kenyon Review*, a quarterly, but would have been a shoo-in for, say, the *New York Times Magazine* on the Sunday in September prior to the contest.)

I teach the personal essay in both literature classes and writing classes. Recently in my writing classes, we looked at a few lines from Joan Didion's essay "On Keeping a Notebook," which first appeared in *Holiday Magazine*, a monthly travel magazine. "I have already lost touch with a couple of people I used to be," she wrote. "It would be of some interest to me to know again what it feels like to sit on a river levee drinking vodka-and-orange-juice and listening to Les Paul and Mary Ford and their echoes sing 'How High the Moon' on the car radio." The topical music reference opens more than the car door and lets us enter a moment in the early 1950s, where we can almost see Didion—I imagine her as inexpressive, but with the heartbeat of a hummingbird—a sixteen-year-old out on a date, drink in hand, sitting on a levee probably at the Sacramento River Delta, swinging her legs, listening to a quick-tempoed love song coming from the car behind her. "Somewhere there's music, it's where you are…"

I offered that prompt—"I have already lost touch with a couple of people I used to be"—to the students in my memoir class this semester. Soon the room was filled with the past, near and distant, ephemeral and the enduring: Harry Potter, training bras, Gatorade, a Sony Walkman, Britney Spears, Son of Sam, a New York City blackout, and this new way college freshmen could connect with one another on the

internet, through something called Facebook. When I asked them to come up with a few apt topical references for personal essays already in progress, we found the references had the effect of condiments, enhancing the flavor, but the allusions also gave the reader instant information: this narrator was a child in the 1990s, that narrator was a teenager in the 1980s. Some topical references further etched the narrator, offering information about his or her social class, locale, passions, and character.

Two of the most enduring personal essays I can think of are completely inseparable from their topicality, not only because in each case the topical is a Big Moment but because the writers make it their own.

Maybe you could say that a topical moment that goes on day after day, year after year, ultimately becomes an eponym for its time, thereby entering into the realm of history. It's a thought to at least keep in mind in reading "The Crack Up," a three-part series F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote for *Esquire* in February, March and April 1936. By the early 1930s, Fitzgerald certainly was aware that he, in his person as well as his work, had come to represent the heady, moneyed 1920s. But what was to happen to him now that the Depression had befallen the country? If you check the OED, the dual meaning of depression, conflating the economic and the emotional, was clearly established by 1934. One could make the case that "The Crack Up" was Fitzgerald's shot at trying to make himself the poster boy for the Depression, in both senses of the word. Economic metaphors are his, well, currency, always used to characterize his emotional state: "I had been drawing on resources I did not possess…mortgaging myself physically and spiritually…[gone were the days] when juice came into one as an article without duty….[then there were] physical resources that I did not command, like a man over-drawing at his bank…" In the end, he determines not to attempt authenticity since "there were plenty of counterfeit coins around that would pass." To be sure, there are topical references that no longer resonate. Who's Professor Canby? Or Tiffany Thayer? But this topical personal essay continues to have a kind of vitality not simply because it is about a monumental and memorable time but because Fitzgerald successfully makes the country's depression a symbol of his own. Symbol, as Patricia Hampl puts it in her essay on "Memory and Imagination," is the realm where feeling and image can merge.

In *Tell Me True: Memoir, History and Writing a Life*, a new

anthology on the relationship between the historical and the autobiographical, co-edited by Patricia Hampl and Elaine Tyler May, the essays are informed by an idea Hampl has long felt passionate about. "If you don't tell your story, someone else will tell it for you." e.g., Fox News, the Tea Partiers, or worse. In addition, the essays probe how anyone's personal story is inextricably mingled with history, concluding that memoir (including the personal essay) is personal history while history is public memoir.

An enduring personal essay where the topical transcends topicality is James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son," which first appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in November 1955 and is alive and with us still. In the essay, which Vivian Gornick has written on so brilliantly in *The Situation and the Story*, Baldwin, with his own consciousness as the organizing principle, recollects a group of memories as rage within the text relentlessly gathers force. He recalls the death of his father, a man whose personal rage had crossed the line into paranoia. He also recollects an experience of his own a year earlier. Denied service at a New Jersey restaurant, he had hurled a glass of water at a waitress, having to then recognize his father's rage as his own, too. But during his father's funeral, he recalls, with some surprise, a moment or two of connection that he and his father long ago shared. With his heart opened by these recollections, he is disarmed—and therefore armed—and able to reckon with an even vaster rage that ignites race riots later that day in Harlem. In an epiphany whereby the topical, the historical, and the symbolic merge, Baldwin knows that "The dead man mattered, the new life mattered; blackness and whiteness did not matter…it had now been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair."

In the future, terms like *daily*, *weekly*, or *monthly*, in relation to publications will have less and less significance, for we are in the midst of a revolution as significant as the one that moved us from the illuminated manuscript to the printing press. We do not know how these new technologies will affect the essay, only that they will, and that it will be an exciting and innovative time for essayists. Will all essayists somehow perform their essays? Will a topical reference survive as an embedded jpeg file of a Harry Potter cover? A YouTube file of James Baldwin talking about civil rights? Who knows? I do hope, though, that when it comes to "How High the Moon" is, we will continue to do just fine without a link to Wikipedia.

Minding the Gap

Linda Underhill

In any great piece of music, if you listen carefully, you will hear moments of silence charging the sounds behind them and ahead of them with urgency. Music is not all sound; it is also silence. Moments of silence serve not only to give the musician a chance to breathe, but to give the listener a chance to hear, to pause and to absorb the vibrations that create sound and the sounds that create melody and harmony.

The same is true of poetry. Separations between the stanzas, the rooms in the house of a poem, leaps that move the reader to unexpected insights, and gaps between the arrangement of words and lines on the blank canvas of the page create spaces for the eye, the breath, and the mind.

So it is in the personal essay, where white space surrounds sections, segments, fragments, moments of being and loosely arranged lists of ideas. Words come out of silence, thoughts come out of emptiness, and writing fills up some but not all of the white space on the page. There are spaces around the writing, there are gaps, there are gasps, there are silent white washes of reflection, transitions between one time and another or one idea and another, or scene changes between one place and another. There are leaps. There are pauses in the journey of thought within the personal essay, this form that experiments with form and creates a glimpse into the landscape of a writer's thought.

If we go back to Michel de Montaigne, who was a master of the digressive personal essay and somehow did cutting and pasting five hundred years before computers made it simple to rearrange text and embellish it, we see that his *essais*, his "attempts" at putting his thoughts into form are filled with gaps, white spaces, leaps from one idea to another, tied together mainly by the presence of the writer, but also by the gaps themselves. They are all his thoughts, and so even if he calls his essay "On Some Verses of Virgil" and it ends up being "On Some Verses about Sex," we are happy to go along for the ride. (And I am always more successful in getting my students to read "On Some Verses of Virgil" by telling them ahead of time that it is really about sex than by telling them ahead of time that it is about Virgil.)

We are comfortable with Montaigne's digressions because such is often the nature of our own thought, leaping from one idea or sensation or memory to another, thoughts tied together only by virtue of the fact that we have thought them; they are all segments of our experience, islands in our watery interior landscape. We know this, and we accept it, or at least many of us do. It would be nice if our thoughts moved logically forward from point A to point B to point C, or if they could always be contained in the form of a well-constructed rhetorical argument, and maybe some people do think that way, but that is not always the case, as Montaigne well knew. He did not set out to arrange his thoughts into a logical pattern, or to construct rhetorical arguments, but rather, as Virginia Woolf put it, to create a soul on the page.

The digressive arrangement of thought in the personal essay has been especially useful for me because I am not by nature a linear thinker. After struggling for years to write linear narratives or memoirs, which is what publishers often say they want, I settled happily into the personal essay form, where the nonlinear narrative in the form of segmenting, braiding, and collaging is perfectly acceptable. The *essai* as Montaigne called it, the "attempt," is by nature an experiment. We're creating the form each time we "try" it, and that appeals to me as well. I like the freedom of it, the spirit of exploration and discovery that it celebrates.

I am not alone. A casual analysis of *Best American Essays* for the past two years reveals that essays using white spaces in one way or another to separate elements in the essay outnumber those that do not by more than two to one. Out of the forty-three individual essays in these two collections, five of them were deliberately segmented, with subtitles or numerals used as headings. Another twenty-four used white spaces in various ways.

Some segmented essays are arranged so symmetrically that the prose becomes very much like poetry, written in stanzas. The arrangement can also be so subtle that readers don't even notice it at first unless they do a close reading, and maybe not even then. I am always surprised to find when I teach the Scott Russell Sanders essay "Buckeye" (in his collection *Writing from the Center*) that students don't notice that the essay is arranged into four sections, which mirror the four quadrants of the lid of the box he uses to hold his father's buckeyes. Like the lid of the box, the essay has four dimensions. "The top is inlaid with pieces fitted so as to bring out the grain, four diagonal joints converging from the corners toward the center," Sanders writes at the end of the first

section. "If I stare long enough at those converging lines, they float free of the box and point to a center deeper than wood." The four sections of his essay also "point to a center," which emerges as his thought progresses from a contemplation of the so-called lucky buckeyes he keeps in the box, to a discussion of the need for environmental conservation. He concludes with these words: "We need to know where we are, so that we may dwell in our place with a full heart." The heart, of course, is another container with four chambers.

Sanders doesn't call attention to the four sections of his essay with numerals or subheadings; he simply uses white space to separate them. Even though he doesn't announce the segments, they are there.

As I said, student writers don't always notice this segmentation at first, but when they do, and when they recognize the way that personal essays often use interconnected segments or chunks of thoughts to arrive at a larger truth, they usually find it incredibly liberating.

Essays that use subtitles to announce segments are more obvious. Many of them are written by poets, who are so familiar with the grouping of thought into stanzas. In an essay called "On Necklaces" by Emily Grosholz, (in *Best American Essays 2008*), the writer groups her ideas into segments that are like beads strung on a necklace. This essay uses subtitles that introduce subtopics: Anthropology, History, Initiation, Business, and so forth, each of them ways to look at the necklace. "A good necklace, like an organism or a poem," she says:

> is much more than the sum of its parts. What it will look like when you finally tote it all up and fasten it on is always a surprise. You don't know that you have achieved, or failed to achieve, gorgeousness…until the last moment when, if you're lucky, you give an involuntary sigh of wonder and recognition.

As with necklaces, so with the essay. You don't know how the parts of it will fit together until you fasten it all together and look at it. Essays such as "On Necklaces" are also celebrating the process of determining the arrangement as much or even more so than the shape of the final product itself. The segments call our attention to the handling of the material and the way that it's been put together, hopefully to achieve gorgeousness. The essay, like the necklace, becomes much more than the sum of its parts.

These are just a few examples. In an approach that could be called "Mind the Gap" (if you're familiar with the ubiquitous signs in the

London Underground), I ask students to examine the white spaces in an essay like ”Buckeye” or “On Necklaces” or any number of others and talk about what the gaps contribute to the essay and how each segment contributes to the whole. I also use exercises that teach students to write segmented essays by collecting memories and sensory details into groups that can be strung together to make a personal essay. Eventually, students see that the white spaces, the gaps between ideas and between sections in an essay, provide readers a chance to pause and absorb, reflect, switch gears and move on. At the same time, white space is the white glue that holds the progression of thought together, reflecting the silent presence of the writer, the pauses between one idea and the next, one time and the next, one experience and the next, one moment and the next.