

INNOVATIONS IN ESSAYING

by Richard Kostelanetz. Published as Introduction to
ESSAYING ESSAYS: ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF EXPOSITION (Out of
London Press, New York, 1975), 1-9.

It's odd that while the essay as a distinctive form in modern literature is so well cherished and enjoyed, it has received so little expert attention. Books upon the drama, upon poetry in its many phases, upon the novel even, a thing comparatively of yesterday, are as leaves in Vallembrosa for number, but books on the essay - where are they? - Richard Burton, *The Essay as Mood and Form* (1901).

Essays differ from fiction in that they are about something particular, which remains outside the work itself. Stories and novels, by contrast, tend to fabricate an artificial universe of related activity that, though it reflects outside reality, defines itself as fictional through internal coherence and consistency. Compared with poets and novelists, essayists deal more directly with what is perceived to be <the real world> - the domains of personal experience and extrinsic circumstance. In practice, essays are used for exposition and description, as well as argument and narration, each purpose reflecting a different perspective on both the materials of life, on one hand, and the processes of communication, on the other. The essay is literature's most common genre, as nearly all of us read more essays than poetry or fiction.

However, most writings in this genre are not called <essays> at all but something else such as <history>, <criticism>, <articles>, <reviews>, <reports>, <letters>, or any of a score of other comparably less august terms. The epithet <essay> is commonly used as an honorific term to identify expositions that, for reasons of style, do more than merely expose (and thus can, for one measure, be reprinted in permanent books).

Since essays tend to document what the author knows before he begins to write, rather than what he discovers in the course of creation, they proceed not from interior understanding but from exterior knowledge. Whereas poetry or fiction represents an author's imagination and feeling, essays represent his thought (informed, no doubt, by imagination and feeling). Whereas poetry and fiction can be <unreal>, essays must relate to verifiable experience; their frame of reference is exterior rather than interior. Essays are generally more premeditated than other literary genres; if stories and poems sometimes <write themselves>, essays are customarily **written**, out of consciousness, in order to distill their authors' prior perceptions. It is true that essays resemble certain kinds of poetry, especially lyric expressions, in their creative orientation and manner of communication, as both are what Northrop Frye calls **thematic genres**: < Works of literature in which no characters are involved except the author and his audience.>

However, essayists differ from lyric poets in favoring prose over verse, denotative language over connotative, declaration over suggestion, explicitness over mystery. Because an essay endeavors to communicate something definite about a particular subject, it honors the ideals of clarity, accuracy, and force; the kinds of obscurity and ambiguous interpretations that are tolerable in poetry or even in fiction are typically unacceptable in essays. Poems are usually shorter than essays, though size alone is not a crucial criterion, as essays vary in length from a single page to a whole book.

Essays are so common that literary scholars and critics have scarcely examined the genre; that is one reason why formal differences in <essays> are so rarely perceived. Most people learned in their childhoods to write the classical form, historically epitomized by Montaigne (1533-92), in which a subject or thesis is announced in the opening paragraph (that echoes the essays title), while the ensuing text of paragraphs, composed of sentences that are usually written in a direct and graceful style, provides a series of illustrations, anecdotes, digressions, possible objections and then refutations, customarily running from the least important to the most consequential. All of these parts ideally reenforce, with roughly syllogistic reasoning, the opening points, which are usually reiterated in the essay's final sentences. (Indicatively, each Montaigne essay was originally set as a single paragraph). Most of the essays written today, from newspaper editorials to academic monographs, approximately observe this traditional form.

Those of us who have reported for newspapers had to master a different structure, customarily called <the pyramid style>, which requires that all of the essential information be crammed into the opening paragraph, called <the lead>, while the remaining paragraphs provide progressively less elaborations of the original data. As there is no definite conclusion in this type of essay, one advantage of the form is that an individual report can be easily clipped, from the bottom up, to a length appropriate to its place and space in the newspaper. An older, more solemn variation of this inverted-funnel structure, is the Ramean essay, favored by Puritan divines, who open with a theological proposition, parts of which are explained and elaborated in all subsequent statements, the essay as a whole proceeding from a universal assertion to numerous particulars. In other words, the subsequent axioms are derived from the initial proposition, for all of the lower bricks support, so to speak, the top of the pyramid. As a didactic form that structurally forbids caveats and counter-arguments, this is, of course, especially appropriate to an ideology that

permits no doubts. The intellectual historian Perry Miller observed that this essayistic structure, like the Ramean logic informing it, was designed to represent <a formal description of the image of God> and this peculiar form influenced subsequent New England essayists.

Many of us have written numerical essays, in which a succession of statements, customarily of equal import, are numbered, usually to emphasize the autonomy of (or distances between) the particular propositions. Legislative documents are usually expressed in this form, later parts often citing earlier ones (by number, rather than by subject). The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein used a more complex enumeration, adapted from scientific writing, to plot the differing relationships between his various assertions, the assumption being that a proposition preceded by the number <4.1>, say, has a different relationship to <4.0> than the one prefaced <5.0>. As Wittgenstein himself noted in his **Tractatus Logico Philosophicus** (1921), <The propositions **n.1, n.2, n.3** are comments on the proposition no. **n**; the propositions **n.m. 1, n.m. 2, etc.** are comments on the proposition no. **n.m.**; and so on.> This formally resembles the popular contemporary structure of separate vignettes - a narratively discontinuous form used in both reportage and fiction - which reflects, in turn, the impact of cinematic montage.

In a conventional non-tabloid newspaper, the multi-headlined front page can be regarded as a multi-part essay about the previous day's major events, but it would be more correct to say that this <essay on yesterday> ushers the page-turning reader into several different essays about particular occurrences - the discontinuous whole introducing the continuous parts. One reason why the daily newspaper is customarily read in random, undirected ways is that it lacks both a focused <beginning> and a definite <end>. A newspaper is designed for <browsing> and <scanning>, rather than for systematic scrutiny, like a book. Questionnaires with blank spaces require us to write comparably fragmented essays, our itemized responses ideally telling our examiner what he

wants to know (usually about ourselves); and our everyday lives are filled with expository surrogates , such as resumes, chronologies, or tables of contents, in which a list, based upon a familiar convention, assumes the essayistic function of outlining an experience and/or defining a reality.

Among the other established essay forms are aphorisms, in which thoughts are not argued, but asserted, ideally condensed into pithy, quotable sentences, which tend to be severe in tone, general in outlook, abstract in perspective, and disconnected in overall structure. The classic exemplars are Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in England, La Rochefoucauld (1613-80) in France, and Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-99) and then Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) in Germany, all of whom were attempting to transcend the leisurely paced prose of their predecessors. Contemporary aphorists of note include Norman O. Brown, especially in his most recent writings, Eric Hoffer (at his best), and the Frenchman Malcolm de Chazel. As the American poet and critic Richard Burton noted of Francis Bacon <He clarified and simplified the prevailing diction, using shorter words and crisper sentences, with the result of a closer-knit, more sententious effect.>

One popular contemporary essayistic form is the published interview, which customarily consists of a series of short, spatially separated, informally phrased remarks; but in spite of such virtues as spontaneity and accessibility, interviews nearly always suffer from expository simplicity and intellectual imprecision. Most of the letters we write have a similarly disconnected structure, as we tend, after an opening sentence of introduction or acknowledgement, to comment separately on points raised before and then to divulge new information or ask new questions, before concluding with a summary or a request for a reply. (The post-script, if any, is invariably articulated in a different tone, further separating it from <the body> of the letter).

Another increasingly familiar form reflects the influence of Charles Olson, an American poet who followed in the examples of both Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams in developing a stylistically impulsive, almost notational, tonally conversational, formally open-ended essay that, like comparable poetry, scrupulously eschewed facile formulations. In this kind of essaying, the author's conclusions remain as evident as his conclusions, while the reader must <work> harder than usual in drawing the necessary linkages and definitions. Indeed, such a diffusion of energy and perception tends, in Olson's own prose, to make individual sentences (and the authorial personality) more prominent than any overarching theme.

Certain essayistic forms are not as new as they might initially seem. For instance expository pastiche, which weaves quotations (and commentary) from disparate sources (and perspectives) rather closely resembles the traditional <commonplace books>, in which a discriminating, wisdom-loving author collected all the choice aphorisms and personal observations that he thought worth preserving. (As this medium historically preceded the impact of the Montaigne essay, pre-Renaissance exposition echoed the digressive disconnectedness, along with the penchant for allusions, of the commonplace books). What is commonly called <the new journalism> represents an innovation not in essayistic form but in reportorial perspective, for its practitioners eschew pure objectivity to let their intelligences and emotional responses function actively in their reportage. While such <subjective realism>, to use Richard Goldstein's term, may be innovative in strictly journalistic contexts, it is scarcely new in the tradition of essay-writing; even Montaigne, after all, was a rather active presence in his prose.

Indeed, nearly all the great contemporary essayists, partially in rejection of the nineteenth century (and academic) value of objectivity, emphasize authorial voice and informal tone, for it is the ideal, as Leslie A. Fiedler notes, <to achieve on the page the lucid,

direct, orderly and vivid flow of conversation, which conversation, itself interrupted and half hearted, seldom attains>. What distinguishes the true essayist from the academic scholar is that the latter is enslaved to his circumscribed subject, while the essayist is inclined to let his mind roam free, his remarks typically tending to be more suggestive than exhaustive. As the essayist writes for a general public, rather than for an audience of fellow scholars, he talks about a fairly familiar experience in the common tongue.

Although the word <essay> implies not only a liberal outlook but a willingness to experiment, most essays are written without consciousness of form (or formal possibility); for remarkably few practitioners have essayed how different forms might follow from traditional functions - or how a form might be invented to suit a particular function.

II

With a new form comes a new content. Form thus determines content - Alexei Kruchenykh (c.1916), as quoted in Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism* (1968).

Genuinely innovative essays are those that move decidedly beyond earlier kinds of essays - beyond not only the classical traditions of linear and/or aphoristic exposition but also beyond modernist essays with their emphasis upon personality and disjunctive structure. Innovative essays are those that confront not just dimensions of extrinsic reality, but also the intrinsic, literary problem of how else essays might be written. Since they tend to be based on radically different structural and stylistic assumptions, they expose twice over not only their particular subjects but also the

readers possible perception of printed communication. As essays depend upon organization, rather than fabrication, formal changes instill a re-essaying of a chosen subject; precisely because a different form reveals connections and perspectives that were not previously available, structural invention can change the essayist's thoughtful perception. (In the writing of fiction, by analogy, the shift from first-person narrator to third, or vice versa, performs a similar function of generating a new perspective upon fictional material.)

One kind of innovation is the conceptually resonant chart, which ideally reveals the essayistic function of compressing a large body of perceptions and/or connections into remarkably little space. Though necessarily simplifying, a chart offers the compensating advantage of vividly documenting the entire picture - a concise image of the whole that reveals contrasts and connections that would not be so apparent if spread over many pages of prose. A chart is particularly useful in documenting multiple relations among several discontinuous elements. Since charts tend to lack explicit beginnings or definite ends, they cannot be read in the conventional way - steadily, in one predetermined direction, at an even speed. Instead, charts must be read around and about, indeterminately, much like geography maps which are, after all, visual essays of a different sort; for a rich chart offers many levels of meaning, generalization and relatedness. (One reason why charts can pack so much perception into so little space is their avoidance of superfluous language; another is their allowance of for sequential discontinuity.) Both maps and charts oblige the reader to draw his own lines between fixed points (e.g. to write his own connecting sentences, usually in his head), and both pack signposts that tell the reader when he has <finished> receiving the available message. Indeed, charts resemble the front pages of newspapers in that the whole is usually perceived before the parts are selectively examined. Evidence suggests that some charts are already too familiar for artistic use (e.g. box scores, financial statements) and that some kinds of perception and information are more conducive to

charting than others. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that an effective chart is worth more than a thousand words. (In my judgement, some of the charts reprinted here distill whole books into a few pages.) Precisely in their emancipation from oral speech, essays in this graphic form realize a mediumistic integrity indigenous to printed communication.

Other experimental essays endeavor to excise those connectives that move the traditional essay along - conjunctions, adjectives, and comparably secondary linguistic baggage; and this syntactical diminution produces a skeletal essay, which likewise compresses large amounts of understanding into comparatively little space. One prominent practitioner in this vein is the literary critic Ihab Hassan, who speaks of his latest work, which he calls <paracriticism>, as <experiments with a discontinuous medium, mixing literary and non-literary materials, mixing expository and other modes of discourse>; and he uses visual techniques, such as unusual typography and design, to represent emphases and relationships that would, in conventional essaying, generally be articulated in words. Especially in contrast to Hassan's more standard criticism, this new way of writing essays seems to <free> his critical mind to generate more perceptions and insights in far fewer pages. To discern how formal inventions can enhance critical intelligence, one need only compare Hassan's seminal essay on <POSTmodernISM> (1971), which is reprinted here, with his stolid, book-length survey of **Contemporary American Literature** (1973), in which the conventions of academic style seem to confine, if not suppress, his knowledge and consciousness. In my judgment, the later says less about its subject in 216 pages than the former does in 26. Given the prestige of <criticism> as a higher form of essaying, it is not surprising that some of the more substantial experimental essays should deal with the realities of contemporary culture. (< The best criticism will be>, in John Cage's suggestion, < the doing of your own work [of art].>) At the extreme of elliptical writing is, of course, essayistic minimalism, in which thoughts are compressed

into isolated sentences that, like Ad Reinhardt's brilliant polemics, echo the traditions of aphorism and yet realize something decidedly different. One page visual essays such as Kenneth Burke's <Cycle of Terms> or Robert Rauschenberg's <Autobiography> (1966) also suggest that aphorism is **not** the only form of essayistic minimalism.

Some innovative essays are entirely visual, consisting only of pictures (either drawn or photographed) that define a certain reality or document an event (rather than telling a story). And just as words can be visually enhanced to make a point that would not be possible in conventional language and or typography, so can the essayist employ an ideographic logic to add clarity, accuracy and force to an initially verbal statement. For instance, the circular, hand-drawn, intrinsically endless theses of my own <Manifestoes> (1970), make polemical points that would be less effective if printed in conventional horizontal lines(e.g., <The truth of fiction is the power of artifice is the truth...>). Not only do the structure and content of this one page essay complement each other, but the visual dimension also serves to introduce the reader to the modes of articulation characteristic of my own visual poetry. Visual essays in this form also move beyond post-Bauhaus exposition, epitomized by Moholy-Nagy's book on **Vision in Motion** (1947) and echoed by Marshall McLuhan and Quentine Fiore in **The Medium is the Massage** (1967), in which rectangular blocks of type (<captions>) accompany rectangular pictures, each <illustrating> the other.

Since this essay seems on the verge of suggesting that crystalline prose might be the least interesting virtue in contemporary essaying, I should add that one sure index of innovation in prose literature is a radically remarkable style. The distinguishing marks of Marvin Cohen's essays, for instance, stem from imposing a hyperbolic, idiosyncratic, essentially fictive style upon initially expository purposes. In truth, had not Sir Thomas Browne's <Urn Burial> (1658) been published so long ago, it would probably seem <new> today.

The American poet and critic J.V.Cunningham remarked, in **The Journal of John Cadan** (1960), <It is apparent that in our society we have too many choices>, but that is untrue, particularly in the writing of essays. Expository writers trying to cope with the unprecedented forms of modern life presently have scarcely enough formal choices available to them. That also explains why discriminating readers rarely come across essays that <seem true> to the texture of contemporary experience of essays that resemble innovative art in challenging their capacities for perception and organization (simply because they must be <read> in unusual ways). It appears that the formal revolutions of artistic modernism have hardly affected the writing of essays, as remarkably few expository writers have considered how else <essays> might be written - or what might be the **most appropriate** form for confronting a particular experience. Especially in comparison to other literary genres, the art of the essay seems untouched by the great modern theme of increasing the pool of possibilities.

The pieces collected here display a gamut of essayistic tones, ranging from the solemn to the humorous, from the didactic to the parodic, from the polemical to the ironic, from the <formal> to the <informal> (to cite a familiar <critical> distinction that has no formalistic relevance); for innovations in form or style do not necessarily cause any limitations in mood. Precisely because they explore the possibilities of print, these essays rarely emulate spoken language or evoke their authors' personalities (and thus they complement the anti-expressionistic tendencies of contemporary art): yet precisely in the radical manner of presentation these essays often reveal the distinguishing marks of truly personal style - quite simply, no other essayist would have regarded experience in this way. Nearly all of them are so different in appearance that, if submitted to any academic course in America, they would <flunk> on sight; yet all of them do what essays have always done - try to distill and communicate perceptions of the world.

It is perhaps unnecessary to add that, in an anthology of this kind, an introduction in this form represents a patent contradiction; for this formally conventional attempt to explain the reality of *Essaying Essays* - the essay on essaying that you are now reading - could appear in these pages only as an <introduction>.