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Tracing the Unfixed: On the Literary Essay and Its In-Betweenness

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Abstract: The genre of the essay, due to its protean nature, resists confinement to a single definition. Although often associated with freedom and openness, the essay also demands a discipline imposed by its form. The modern essay, beginning with Montaigne, has consistently resisted being forced into the strictures of fixed classification. The assumption that the subjectivity of the essayist and the subject matter directly influence the essay's form is largely supported when tracing the genre's evolution. Famously originating from a tower in France, the essay has since expanded to overlap with nearly every major literary genre and medium.

Keywords: Essay Form, Literary Essay, Montaigne, Sensibility, Subjectivity

The day we discussed my topic and my supervisor asked me to read about essays, I searched online for books on the subject. To my surprise, almost all the books were focused on two kinds of essays: those written for IAS/PCS exams and those prepared for the IELTS exam. One or two other books appeared, but they were not as insightful as I had hoped. When I spoke to some of my friends, they only confirmed my fear; almost all of them asked what kind of research could possibly be done on essays like 'My Best Friend' and 'An Ideal Citizen'. I panicked.

I went back to my supervisor, and this time, through our conversation, I recalled some of the essays I had read before and found a starting point for my reading. As I began to read more, I realised that essay, especially the literary essay, is a composition in which the essayist speaks about almost anything in an intimate, personal and informal manner. I also discovered that the essay is often distinguished based on its medium of presentation. The written essay uses language as its medium and can be classified as either literary or non-literary, which are further divided as formal and informal types. In contrast, the film essay and photographic essay use film and photographs as their medium.

Writing an essay is often compared with gardening, love, and a little walk in the park, but I soon realised that it is but only one aspect of it. The essay is all of these things, but it is also a walk on a tightrope, requiring a delicate balance between subject matter and style, form and content, idea and expression. Atkins defines the

essay as a form of ‘in-betweenness.’ He argues that the essay is the “intersection of experience and meaning, idea and form (or body)” (Atkins 5). According to him, the essay lives between extremes such as fiction and philosophy, idea and form, and experience and meaning. It is both, either, and neither at the same time. This “in-betweenness” creates a tension that is a defining feature of the essay as a literary form.

Like love and gardening, the essay is an act of freedom, an act of living “a free life and enjoying the satisfactions of a somewhat undisciplined existence” (White vii). It is to be a “second-class citizen” (White vii) and to be content with that role. However, this freedom is not without its restrictions. The essay is wild, untameable, and free, like the golden deer (swaran mirg), so captivating that one feels compelled to chase it, yet doing so might lead one astray, one may end up losing everything. It is this balance between the wild and the disciplined that underlies Huxley’s famous description of the essay as “free association artistically controlled” (Huxley 3).

When we talk about the essay, we often refer to qualities like openness, looseness, unpredictability, pleasure and surprise. It is generally seen as an expression of freedom and pleasure, attained through the process of contemplation and understanding, not only in content but also in form. Bhamaha, in his classification of Kavya (literature) based on the nature of composition, divides it into five parts. One of these is Anibaddha, which Kapil Kapoor defines as “unconnected compositions” (Kapoor 78). The terms Anibaddha and Nibaddha are also used in classical Indian music, where Nibaddha refers to compositions that are structured, with tāla, mātra, and laya, while Anibaddha refers to those that are free-flowing and unbound. This concept aptly reflects the nature of the essay.

As a writing style, essay resists the boundaries of any fixed genre. It bends them, even bypasses them. For instance, Janet Malcolm’s essay “Forty-One False Starts” is essentially forty-one different beginnings to a piece of writing about her meeting and interview with David Salle. Yet even this formal experimentation captures only one dimension of the essay. A great essayist should also possess a sense of responsibility, order and restraint, qualities that give the essay its characteristic tension and paradox. Huxley asserted that it is the sense of responsibility and controlled freedom that leads to the greatness of the essayist. Montaigne was a master of it. Huxley’s phrase “free association artistically controlled” (3) was specifically used in Montaigne’s context. Montaigne knew the trick of coming back, coming back consciously and knowingly.



For Rilke Orpheus is a symbol of creative power, an elusive power that comes and goes of its own accord, inspiring the act of writing. In Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, Ariel, the airy spirit who serves Prospero, takes the form of creative power. Yet unlike Orpheus, Ariel must ask permission to leave. This difference reflects not only the nature of the characters but also the maturity of their creators: Shakespeare, nearing the end of his artistic life, portrays creative power as something to be guided, even released with grace; Rilke, by contrast, was still grappling with the "strange possibility of no longer writing ... as a kind of relief" (Rilke 312). Similarly, Robert Frost, in his poem "Birches," expresses a desire to leave the world for a while, but only on a one condition that he may return:

I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. (Frost 153)

This same tension, between freedom and return, between escape and control, echoes in Montaigne's mature self-awareness. In his essay "On Vanity," he writes, "I get lost, but more from license than carelessness. My ideas follow one another, though sometimes at a distance, and have regard for each other, though obliquely" (Montaigne 1124). It is a subtle defence of the essay's digressions and an acknowledgment that the writer, like the essay itself, moves freely, but with a quiet internal coherence.

While reflecting on the craft of essay writing, Virginia Woolf, in her essay "The Decay of Essay-Writing," describes it as "the art of penmanship" and "manual dexterity with a pen" (2). She reiterates this idea in another essay, "Montaigne," where she emphasizes that writing is not simply a matter of putting thoughts to paper. It is an act shaped by rituals and resistance. Woolf suggests that wielding the pen is no easy task, for it is not merely an instrument but a force in its own right. The pen, she writes, has "all kinds of habits and ceremonies" and is "dictatorial." It "has the ability to turn [the] ordinary man into prophet" and transforms "the natural stumbling trip of human speech into [the] solemn and stately march of pens" (Woolf 129).

The trick, as Virginia Woolf suggests, is to remain human. She observes that Montaigne knew how to wield the pen—not merely as a tool, but as an extension of his humanity. Writing about his subject and style in "On



Repenting,” Montaigne famously says, “Others form Man; I give an account of Man and sketch a picture of a particular one of them who is very badly formed and whom I would truly make very different from what he is if I had to fashion him afresh” (Montaigne 907–08). In the Foreword to his collected essays, E.B. White echoes this understanding of the essayist’s role. He argues that what appears to be openness or informality in the essay is, in fact, only a “partial escape” from the discipline the form demands. The essay, he writes, although a relaxed form, imposes its own discipline, raises its own problems, and these disciplines and problems soon become apparent and ... act as a deterrent to anyone wielding a pen merely because he entertains random thoughts or is in a happy or wandering mood. (White vii)

The word protean is often associated with the nature of the essay. It derives from Proteus, the shape-shifting Greek sea-god, whose ability to assume multiple forms mirrors the essay’s own formal flexibility. The essay, too, continually changes shape, swaying between possibilities, or as Aldous Huxley describes them, the “three poles of reference”: “the pole of the personal and autobiographical,” “the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete particular,” and “the pole of the abstract-universal” (Huxley 2). In this context, A.K. Mehrotra observes that the essay may take the form of a story, an obituary, or even a book review, what might be called its attribute of appropriateness. The essay does not simply defy the limitations of genre; it overlaps and absorbs them, becoming a means of reaching the same destination by discrepant paths. Its shape depends on the essayist’s voice, their mode of expression, and their chosen form of evocation or disclosure.

This protean quality is evident in two modern Indian essays: Amitava Kumar’s “Missing Person” and Dom Moraes’s “Frank Moraes.” Both centre on acts of remembering—Kumar writes about his mother, Moraes about his father—but they do so in strikingly different ways. Kumar’s essay focuses primarily on his mother’s final rites. His portrayal is largely perceptual and reconstructed through others’ accounts. We rarely see his mother; instead, we are told about her through his memory. But the very first sentence of the essay is: “[M]y mother’s nails and toes were painted red before I lit her funeral pyre on the bank of the Ganges” (Kumar 199). This moment is tangible, symbolic, and almost surreal, his eyes present in the final act.

In contrast, Dom Moraes’s essay is built on sustained visual observation. We encounter his father vividly—hunched over a desk, surrounded by books, the only room in the house not adorned with his photographs. The essay becomes not just a portrait of the father, but also an elegy for the mother’s suffering, which Dom



witnesses. The closing image is devastating: doctors taking his mother away to an asylum in Bangalore. Unlike Kumar, whose gaze enters only at the moment of cremation, Moraes watches, records, and relives. His essay relies on the eye as a witness; Kumar's leans on the ear and the intangibility of memory.

Robert Atwan defines the essay as a form of writing "which is personal, but not necessarily autobiographical, and is deeply engaged with issues and ideas" (Atwan). It is far more than a vehicle for emotional release; the essay embodies thought in motion, grounded in inquiry rather than confession. Scott Russell Sanders, in his essay "The Singular First Person," describes the essay as both "curious monologues" and "maps of meaning" (33). For him, the essay is an act of resistance in a homogenized culture: "In this era of pre-packaged thought, the essay is the closest thing we have, on paper, to a record of the individual mind at work and play. It is an amateur's raid in a world of specialists" (32). The form becomes a haven, he adds, "for the private, idiosyncratic voice in an era of anonymous babble" (33).

Theodor Adorno, writing from a philosophical vantage point, calls the essay "the form of the fragment," praising its refusal to offer totalizing conclusions. For Adorno, the essay thinks in constellations; ideas in proximity, not linear argument. And yet, even here, the freedom of the essay is held in tension with rigor. In Adorno's view, the essayist must resist systematization while still pursuing intellectual integrity.

The essay, then, has evolved into a kind of perennial dialectic, a space where the independent thinker enters into dialogue with, and sometimes opposition to, the dominant systems of thought. R.L. Kauffman echoes this in his claim that the current intellectual landscape demands "a less programmed, more venturesome mode of response, a kind of thought at once fragmentary and holistic, not governed by exclusive principles, whether systematic or unsystematic in nature" (Kauffman 237). For Kauffman, the essay, with its openness and resistance to closure, is precisely suited to this kind of thinking. Its formal fluidity, its embrace of contradiction, and its refusal to adhere to fixed boundaries make it not only a space for subjective expression, but a site where subjectivity itself remains fluid, contingent, and constantly under revision.

The day I searched for books on the essay, I didn't find what I was expecting. Instead, I came across a poem titled "Essay on Craft" by Ocean Vuong, a Vietnamese-American poet, essayist, and novelist. The title itself felt fitting—it's not a guide to writing but a reflection on the struggle to create something out of almost



nothing. The poem captures the effort and vulnerability involved in writing. Vuong is aware of the limitations of both craft and language, yet he continues to shape something from them. He writes:

I gave it hands
despite knowing
that to stretch that clay slab
into five blades of light,
I would go
too far. Because I, too,
needed a place
to hold me. (Ocean Young)

Here, the image of forming hands out of clay, pushing the material too far, speaks to the risks and hopes of writing. It's about making something not just to express but also to hold and steady the self. In that sense, the poem reflects what many essays try to do: to find shape, even if imperfect, in the midst of uncertainty.

To conclude, some of the defining attributes of the essay are the diversity of its subject matter, the distinctiveness of authorial subjectivity, and the dialectical relationship between the two. The literary essay, in particular, is an expression of the essayist's sensibility, shaped through serious contemplation of an object and rendered in a literary style. It is both an attempt and a process. The principal aim of the literary essayist is to achieve a fusion of content, style, and form.

Unlike writing that is simply "about" something, the literary essay exists as a dynamic and self-aware dialogue. It is a free yet disciplined play of thought, one that reflects the essayist's inner life as it engages with the outer world. This tension, this paradox, is the essay's defining quality. And at the heart of it all lies a simple truth: the art of essay writing begins, and endures, in the effort to become, and remain, human.

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