

# Back to the Essay: *World Literature Today* in the Twenty-First Century

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When I became this journal's Executive Director in 1999, I knew that journals and magazines, like people, encounter natural opportunities for renewal. *World Literature Today* would quickly face several such moments. There was the new millennium, of course, but also the thirtieth anniversary in the year 2000 of our prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature, and then the journal's seventy-fifth anniversary in 2002 (dating back to the *Books Abroad* era, begun in 1927). I had earlier put portraits of *WLT*'s eight editors on my office wall (including the current editor, William Riggan), and as I daily consulted those eight faces, I saw that *WLT* was in the enviable position — rare among journals and magazines in America — of having an illustrious tradition on which to build. *WLT* was in the unusual position of being able to *choose* to engage with the challenges and opportunities of the coming century — to understand emerging literatures, to weigh new directions in scholarship, to focus on the changing interests of our readership, and (through electronic and traditional means) to serve young scholars and students as never before. *WLT* had the opportunity to replicate, or at least to approach, the boldness of its first editor and founder Roy Temple House, who began *Books Abroad* at the University of Oklahoma in the basement of a classroom building with no budget (and probably no heat) and only student volunteers.

Roy House's mission statement in 1927, "Foreword to Our First Issue — By the Editor," seemed an excellent place to begin to think about the journal's future, if only because it expressed so clearly the rational and patient, yet ambitious attitude that has guided this journal through several literary eras and international wars. House's simple description of the new journal's agenda exemplifies what Claire De Baldia recently characterized as the traditional attitude of the essay writer, the "essayistic spirit," the willingness to "essay" in a rational manner, and generally for a nonspecialist reader, some issue

or development brought to light in the context of a particular occasion. House points, for example, to the scholarly need for "really useful information" about "the more important book publications of Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, the South American republics, and perhaps other countries" (1). He concedes that covering all of this may be too ambitious, and the "difficult task" of understanding world literature will never be accomplished "as well and thoroughly as [one could] wish it might be done." House acknowledges that in producing essays, or journals with essays in them, the result inevitably will be "criticized for . . . omissions and inclusions" and also for the "lack of a hard and fast plan as to just what types of book shall be treated and what types left to other publications." All one can do is take the traditional

stance of the patient essayist and be willing to innovate, to make changes as needed. House admits candidly, as if speaking to a coeditor, that he is committed to "opportunism," and he "fully expects to change . . . policy here and there as circumstances may demand it." In effect, essay writing and journal publishing are wagers on "opportunism," adaptability, a willingness to respond to circumstances and invent something new.

The "baggy monster" of the essay, as described by Michel de Montaigne (the Renaissance originator of the essay), but also by modern scholars like De Baldia, projects exactly this sentiment and approach — the analytic perspective as it encounters an *occasion* in which to make discriminations on behalf of something of value. In the essay's main line, the emphasis is always on the particularity of perspective, often a personal perspective, and on exploration of the occasion that has given rise to a pressing question.

Roy House's words — "difficult task," "omissions," "inclusions," "opportunism" — go well with the picture of House looking out from my wall. Wearing the green visor and rimless glasses expected of editors and publishers in the early twentieth century, and with several manuscripts and journals before him, he looks up as if to say that he can allow time for a photo on this busy day. But his straight-up posture also says he does not turn easily from work or veer from what he calls his "chiefest concerns" — particularly what he pinpoints in his

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foreword as the question of “how so small a publication as ours, which cannot possibly discuss all the current offerings . . . can make infallible selection of the most valuable part to educated Americans . . . of high-grade fiction, history, biography, literary criticism and literary history, essay, verse, even popular philosophy and popular science” (1–2). House has already given the answer in his version of the adaptive policy of the essayist, the “opportunism” which “fully expects to change . . . policy here and there as circumstances may demand it.” The stiffness of the picture suggests that having this knowledge did not lessen the actual task.

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In this same spirit of valuing possibility and innovation, the current editors are now equipping *WLT* to engage with this century much as Roy House equipped it for the last. *WLT*'s new look, inside and out, indicates the direction this renewal has taken — to guide readers easily

through the journal's many offerings and convey the energy evident on its pages. This design should say (we hope), “Come inside! Important questions are being sorted and weighed on these pages in lively and significant discussions.” We plan to put more poetry on these pages, and we will open up new “sections” in the journal and reach new markets by responding to cultural and literary events in a more timely manner than before.

Paramount among these changes is the focus on the “essay” as the preferred mode for this journal. “Essay” here should be taken in the spirit of House's approach to his tasks — as careful and well informed as possible, yet bold enough to make decisions and state opinions without waiting to achieve an impossible level of perfection. The essay is distinct from the “professional article,” written for insiders such as professors and graduate students. As William Gass suggests, the essay is the “opposite” of the professional article in being open and lively writing intended for nonspecialists as well as professionals (*Essays on the Essay*, 26). Beginning with House's mission statement, *WLT* has always promoted such writing, but even good academic writing — with self-conscious discussions of method, materials, and results — can be forbidding to a nonspecialist, literate audience.

The main tradition of the “essay,” by contrast, dating to Montaigne's *Essais* in 1580 and Francis Bacon's *Essays*

in the later sixteenth century, sets a different tone. The traditional essay can be rigorous in judgment as it treats weighty but also lighter matters, but, whatever the topic, the essay moves forward in a nonspecialized parlance that is inclusive and engaging. Consider that among the great prose documents of the Western tradition since the late sixteenth century, many are essays and relatively few are professional articles.

*WLT*'s new preference for the essay does not come about in a vacuum (we are not making up the need to champion the essay), and so I will focus on the current scene for a moment to clarify the essay's recent fortunes. For example, when O. B. Hardison Jr. wrote in 1989 that the essay in times of crisis and transition seems to come forward as “uniquely suited” to expressing cultural and social concerns, he anticipated current debates about readable writing and the social function of scholarship. What social value and importance does the essay have? If we judge from the small subscription lists of most academic journals, educated readers apparently know that scholarship is a closed enterprise intended for professors and graduate students and that academics generally write only for one another. Anyone who reads an academic journal and is not a professional scholar belongs to a small group who see scholarly writing as worth the tough sledding. Scholarship does influence the culture and, at certain moments, truly shapes it, but this is not the common notion.

Yet, is it evident why scholarly writing in literary studies should be confined to so small an audience? Is it really clear why reading literary scholarship should be so difficult an undertaking? Historians of the essay often point out that the seeds of this difficulty were evident even in the earliest essays. Hardison says the “standard prose form” of the sixteenth century, when the essay was invented, was the “oration” (13), a highly conventionalized and difficult mode of writing comprising effects taken from Greek rhetoric: *exordium* (expressing the main point), *confirmatio* (arguments in favor of the main point), *refutatio* (answering arguments against the main point), and *peroratio* (summary and restatement of the main point). Such effects were achieved only through extensive “advance planning” (14). Montaigne's new “essays” in the late sixteenth century were intended to counter this difficult writing by being more adaptable to the needs of what was being written about. Operating along the lines of a different model of rhetoric, essays worked against the assumptions of the oration by being “associative, discursive, informal, meandering, and [by contrast to the oration] slovenly.” Montaigne thought

the new essay writing could shape itself as needed and, in effect, assume the shape of the material it was discussing.

Bacon's essays later in the sixteenth century followed not only Montaigne's example, but also that of the Roman historian Tacitus in that they were compact, sometimes fragmented, and often "curt to the point of obscurity" (*Essays on the Essay*, 15). Whereas Montaigne sought to put "the same on paper as on the lips . . . far removed from affectation, free, loose, and bold" (1:26), Bacon's "essays" were cryptic, owing something, in Hardison's estimation, to "the hugely successful collection of aphorisms made by Erasmus," the great Dutch humanist of the early sixteenth century (16). At this point of the essay's development, there is an open and adaptive strain of essay (the main line) and another strain that is covert and indirect, which in fact foreshadows the professional article in its reliance on specialized language and fragmented presentation.

The persistence of both the Montaigne and Bacon traditions can be seen in Virginia Woolf's description in "The Modern Essay" of the essayistic spirit and the way essay writing can go astray. She writes that the "essay must be pure . . . from dullness, deadness, and deposits of extraneous matter" (296). And yet, she goes on, "if the essay admits more properly than biography or fiction of sudden boldness and metaphor, and can be polished till every atom of its surface shines . . . [we] are soon in sight of ornament. Soon the current, which is the life-blood of literature, runs slow . . . [and] words coagulate in frozen sprays" (297).

De Baldia interprets Woolf's comments to say that "the most obvious pitfall for [writing] the essay . . . is an over-eager inclination toward style which self-indulgently prompts it to be a 'trifle literary'" (8). De Baldia would likely agree, however, that the problem of excessive adornment, being "a trifle literary," is a problem inherent to literary creation. In effect, linguistic playfulness and "adornment" are defining traits of literature, and yet the potential loss of the main "current" of an essay (a willingness to respond to the material at hand) necessarily underlies the potential of invention. Woolf's complaint about excessive adornment suggests that essays fail when they are not adaptable to the material at hand, which is not literary but social in origin. The essay in this view — as Hardison believes too — has an important social connectedness and is "uniquely suited to expressing this contemporary mode of being-in-culture" (27). Essays, perhaps unique among literary genres, helpfully mirror the culture back to itself in an immediate and powerful way. Hence, the hampering of

that function — losing the main "current" of the essay — has significant implications.

The current debate over scholarly writing and the essay follows this lead and focuses on the essay's ethical and social responsibility — what social function the essay has. Over the last twenty-five years, for example, the application of philosophical methodology in literary and cultural criticism has highlighted issues about general readability and the quality of scholarly writing. The debate has circled around the use of semiotics (sign theory), the influence of the French historian Michel Foucault, and the ideas and writing practices of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. At issue has been the theoretically informed but often jargon-laden criticism that has issued from these sources. Critics of literary and cultural "theory" have tended to align themselves with the Montaigne tradition of open and engaging writing, all the while lamenting the loss of a common parlance in critical discourse. Those supporting "theory" and philosophical approaches have embraced, in effect, the Bacon tradition of fragmented expression and insider discourse.

While the era of theory and ever-new approaches to literary criticism has passed, literary studies may continue to carry the baggage

of "bad writing" from that era. Take, for example, the controversy over Judith Butler, influential professor of rhetoric and comparative literature.

In a recent piece in the *New York Times*, "A 'Bad Writer' Bites Back," she answers attacks on her "bad writing." "In the last few years," she explains, "a small, culturally conservative academic journal has gained

public attention by showcasing difficult sentences written by intellectuals in the academy. The journal, *Philosophy and Literature*, has offered itself as the arbiter of good prose and accused some of us of bad writing by awarding us 'prizes'" (A27). Making Theodor Adorno her authority, she goes on to argue the need — in fact, the obligation — to be "difficult" and unorthodox in her writing. These famous "prizes" to Butler and others have foregrounded the inaccessibility of much academic prose. James Miller, in "Is Bad Writing Necessary? George Orwell, Theodor Adorno, and the Politics of

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Language," has assessed the success of Butler's self-defense. He argues that the contemporary version of Montaigne *vs.* Bacon is George Orwell (the British author) *vs.* Theodor Adorno (the German philosopher), and Butler's main defense of her convoluted prose is that alignment with left-leaning cultural politics, explicitly with Adorno, demands a searching critique in the manner of dense, philosophical writing. As this argument goes, only when the reader is displaced from comfortable assumptions and ways of thinking will tired (bourgeois) values — which people will otherwise accept unknowingly — really be challenged.

Miller shows that the issues associated with the Montaigne *vs.* Bacon debate still apply, but the emphasis now is on the use of philosophical terminology and the convoluted critique advanced to shatter calcified modes of thought. In "The Essay as Form" Adorno argues for the necessity of subversive writing to force the reader to penetrate the illusions and injustices of commercial, status-quo culture. Miller quotes Adorno as saying that it serves no purpose "to avoid all technical expressions, all allusions to spheres of culture that no longer exist." "The logic of the day," Adorno goes on, "which makes [too] much of clarity, has naïvely adopted this perverted notion of everyday speech" (36). Adorno and Butler both argue that agents of social tyranny and "hegemony" have used language strategically to monitor and control other official, nonlinguistic modes of expression. Those who use debased language under the guise of being clear — whatever their motives — only support and reproduce the system that constructed a kind of nonthinking tyranny. Effective cultural or literary criticism, therefore, must find openings as it transforms the debased language of commerce to subvert the system linguistically.

Adorno readily admits that the radical critique business is not pretty, but, given the importance of actual language in shaping thought and perception, language must remain a key site for this work. Attention continually must be given to the manipulation of language to open up new areas of thought and resistance — hence the need for "bad" (read: subversive) writing.

The Orwell side responds to this argument by saying simply that bad writing is ineffective, and no rationale for performing the task badly will explain failure. Orwell was also a left-leaning social critic, and he demonstrated repeatedly that the tradition of the essay has always tolerated broad innovation in style and presentation. Surely "good writing" is not the presence of conventional rhetoric, but the reader's understanding

and what the reader actually *does* as a result of reading (what Woolf designates in her shorthand as "pleasure"). At face value, Orwell's point ironically parallels Adorno's in saying that readers and writers must resist the mystifications of language or else they will be controlled by people whose values they may not endorse. But whereas Orwell values a rigorous and clarified common speech in the essay, Adorno supports using technical language as the necessary derailment of conventional "sense" so as to destroy cultural and social illusions. By comparison, the sharpest contrast here comes in the Orwellian idea of freshness and clarity in writing as the frame, in a democracy, for effective action.

Adorno is more complex. The practice of radical intellectual protest, as many commentators have said, seldom has a significant impact on an audience. In fact, it may have no practical outcome in actual politics and frequently even defines itself as standing apart from practice. Miller even argues persuasively that Adorno's is an "academic left avowedly *uninterested* in practical politics" (34, italics added). In light of there being no serious agenda for producing writing that has an effect outside of itself, sociologist Leo Lowenthal, quoted by Miller, says that there is no "politics" and no practical dimension to Adorno's view of the essay. "Ultimately, Adorno had a simple motto," Lowenthal argues: "'Don't participate'" (42).

Roy House would line up behind Orwell and, needless to say, would be perplexed by Adorno. From a publisher's viewpoint, a journal tries to reach readers, and open and lively writing reaches larger numbers of readers, which, in turn, enables the journal to reach even more readers. I think House would further add that, like university presses, academic journals with their tax-exempt status and subsidies are partially shielded from market forces. The turning room created by institutional sheltering should be an occasion not for the inaction of an idealistic elitism but for boldness in continuing to discover its material and develop an audience — in effect, to have a real impact.

Even aside from such pragmatic considerations, however, most working editors, like most working writers, will be suspicious of the intellectual integrity of writing so as not to be understood. Miller argues that the tradition of radical critique with no tie to practical effects in the reader is ultimately not so much a debased practice as a romantic and mystical tradition (36). And, in point of fact, in "The Essay as Form" Adorno calls the "polar opposite" of the essay "absolute knowledge" (166), the standard by which he judges the essay to be mundane

and lacking. Most commentators will agree with Adorno that the essay as a form cannot be a purveyor of "absolute knowledge." Rather, what it means to write for an audience, and the "opportunistic" changes writers make to be effective for readers, is never "absolute." Even writers who should know better (Miller included) too often overlook the judgment of good writing in relation to the demands of reaching particular audiences. Who can object to the occasions when philosophers write for other philosophers, literary critics for other critics, and physicists for other physicists? At such moments, outsiders, legitimately, will be left out. The problem of "bad writing" that Orwell and Miller describe arises when there is the unwarranted influence of insider writing on writing that should communicate broadly. The result is a kind of crossed writing that tries to reach several audiences whose expectations conflict (as in the tendency of first-year writing students to combine an extremely casual style with pompous and highly formal diction). On occasion, external forces such as intellectual prestige will divert readers, at least momentarily, from the simple fact of poorly written prose, as happened with many imitators of Foucault's and Derrida's writing in the 1980s.

WLT's preference for the essay in its main tradition is a preference for good writing in the way I have been discussing here. The essay tradition is not a prescriptive one of writing in a certain mold, but a capacious one defined mainly by a strategy for maintaining effective ties among writing form, the material being discussed, and the intended audience. Essays in the main tradition tend to have a definable perspective, even on occasion a personal one, and they speak in an idiom that reaches a broad audience. They tend to emphasize the occasion for foregrounding a question or issue as important, and they tend to demonstrate the argument in the form of the essay itself. This is Montaigne's point about adapting the essay to fit its material, and this tendency to embody an argument and present it as current testimony rather than as prior authority is a strong sign of being on the essay's terrain.

Roy House would doubtless remind us that one's plans in the world of essay writing and journal pub-

lishing frequently need to be altered. WLT's plan to encourage the publication of essays will take forms we have not yet imagined, hybrid forms, surely, of the essay-and-professional-article. We shall see. In House's words, the current editors once again "offer their first number [of a new era] with the conviction that they are undertaking a work which very much needed doing. Readers who see how later issues can be made an improvement over this first one . . . are urged to write and make suggestions" (1). What we find so encouraging about going "back to the essay" is that this form thrives on and even demands such collaboration.\*

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