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What Are Essays For?

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When we devise and teach English courses, we may have all sorts of educational outcomes in view - increased knowledge of a cultural heritage, enhanced sensitivity in reading, greater self-confidence in the presentation and discussion of ideas, social and cultural empowerment, personal maturity. But on the whole the only outcome we actually insist upon and evaluate is writing. Writing well - however this is defined - is the one thing needful for getting certificated in the subject; it's both the necessary and the sufficient condition.

Nor is it only a question of grades. I remember, years ago, being initiated as a part-time tutor at the Open University. The way an OU humanities course works is that a team of full-time academics at Milton Keynes produce printed course units and broadcasts which are distributed nationally; part-time tutors spread around the country then supplement these materials by giving face-to-face tutorials and marking the students' assignments. I soon realised that this rather complicated course structure was habitually interpreted in different ways by the three different groups of people involved. The academics thought of the course as essentially consisting of the units; the part-timers thought of it as essentially consisting of the direct teaching; and the students thought of it as essentially consisting of the assignments. It's not that anyone denied the importance of the other parts of the course; it's just that it's hard to conceive of a tripartite structure without covertly assuming that one of the three elements is the main one, the one to which the other two are instrumental - and what everyone does is to choose as that centre the bit which they produce themselves. So students' writing is important, not only because it's privileged by the assessment system, but also because it naturally forms, for the students, the central action of the course. What they learn is arguably more powerfully determined by what they write than by what we teach.

It's therefore a fact of some significance that what they do write, on English courses after GCSE, is mostly essays. The essay is, so to speak, the default genre for student writing. Other forms may come into play to meet special requirements, or as a result of inventiveness on the part of the tutor or student; but if no such exceptional factors apply, everyone returns, as if by a common homing instinct, to setting, writing and marking essays. What's more, the higher you go up the system, the more true this becomes: the essay has a stronger grip on the life of an undergraduate than on that of a sixth-former; and when you come to do a Ph.D. the course and the essay have become identical. In this way, other forms of writing in response to reading get defined as preparatory - as things we devise to help novices get into the subject, until such time as they're ready for the real thing. The apparent inevitability of this progression makes the form look natural, as if intellectual activity produced essays the way a tree produces leaves. Clearly this is not so: the essay is a culturally specific form of communication which has not always existed, and which depends for its existence now on some quite definite institutional contexts. I don't want to dive straight into an argument about whether or not the essay ought to be removed from its dominant pedagogic position. Rather, I want to denaturalize the essay; to think about how it comes to occupy this position, and about the meaning of its being there.

One simple way of dispelling the air of inevitability is to read Ian Michael's history of early English teaching. The main formal practices of language work in the Renaissance grammar school were translation and imitation; when systematic vernacular teaching took shape, equivalents for translation were found in paraphrase and summary. Immense stress was also laid, as is well known, on memorisation. An early eighteenth century pedagogic text quoted by Michael adds that, besides this trio of paraphrasing, imitating and memorising, pupils should write 'Colloquies, Essays, Fables, Characters, Themes, Epistles, Orations, Declarations, &c.' (Michael, 1987 p.304). Even without the 'etcetera', this suggests about a dozen forms of language

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production which can be used for teaching or assessment, of which the essay is only one. How did it come to be the sole survivor?

The answer must have something to do with the evident basis of this list in the theory and practice of classical rhetoric. All the exercises mentioned relate to one or another of the basic skills of the orator as they come down from Cicero and Quintilian - invention, arrangement, style, elocution and memory - and the intended outcome of this programme of formulaic and imitative writing is presumably a practical familiarity with the various oratorical genres - argument, praise, familiar letter, and so on - which between them make up the universe of classical discursive competence. With the disintegration of this universe in the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, that repertoire of exercises came to look elaborately and oppressively formalistic: students were wasting on the labyrinthine study of mere words time that should be devoted to learning about the real world.

Modern English teaching, you could say, happens in the shadow of a secular displacement. For a very long time (the whole period during which the *trivium* held sway in the grammar-school curriculum) the arts of language were capable of carrying the entire content of secondary education. Then, in one of Foucault's decisive shifts, language ceased to be the encyclopedia of all knowledge and was now nothing more than a set of signs for representing a knowledge which existed outside it (Foucault, 1970). It was called upon, therefore, to shed its obfuscating formal richness and aim for transparency.

The essay was the fragment of the old repertoire best fitted to perform this self-effacing function. As a *literary* genre, it is traceable back to Montaigne and Bacon, for whom it was a deliberate suspension of rhetorical formality. 'I want to appear in my simple, natural and everyday dress, without strain or artifice; for it is myself that I portray' (Montaigne, 1958 p.23). The word means, or rather meant, a sketch, a rough draft, a purely personal monologue making no claims to authority. That is, the essayist was choosing a marginal space in the system of rhetorical genres, enjoying the freedom of a bracketed and unofficial discourse. The word is defined in just this sense by Samuel Johnson, whose essayistic *personae* - the Rambler, the Idler - display the same self-deprecating move. At this stage, then, what is meant by 'writing an essay' is handling a topic with a sort of improvisatory ease, as opposed to making it a 'theme', which meant the formal treatment of a set proposition in seven parts - proposition, reason, confirmation, simile, example, testimony, conclusion. This taxonomy is, again, highly rhetorical, most of its categories relating to places of invention; what consequently happened, from the late eighteenth century on, was that its artifice came to be seen as a pointless artificiality, while at the same time the essay lost its connotations of artlessness because of the discrediting of the art which it eschewed. The distinction between essay and theme fell into meaninglessness, and the name of the conflation was 'essay'. It was at this point - early in the nineteenth century - that the essay started to become the dominant form of English composition in schools.

One particular reason for this was the immense pedagogic prestige of Addison, who well into the nineteenth century held the kind of presidency of writing in English which Cicero enjoyed in Latin. The *Spectator* was the convenient epitome of good English prose, because of its adroitness at combining contrary virtues. Stylistically, for example, it blended elegance with conversational plainness, informality with design, moralism with humour. It was learned, but wore its learning with unpedantic and gentlemanly lightness; it was satirical, but tempered its wit with good sense; it disseminated useful information, but did so with a mild philosophical reflectiveness which saved it from the merely utilitarian. A bit of everything and not too much of anything, in fact. At the end of the eighteenth century, one maker of anthologies of English literary extracts for schools wrote about how the poems and passages he provides should be used: they should be examined from grammatical, metrical, historical and critical points of view, but with the intention of forming and evaluating taste, not 'stopping to develop difficulties with the coldness of a critic' (Michael, 1987 pp.118-19). This is exactly the tradition. The essay is to be analytic up to a point, but it is not to subject the text to the inhuman mechanical analysis of the professional scholar; rather, it is to express the cultivated response of a man of taste.

The essay is the perfect discursive space for this cultivated humanism precisely because of its lack of formal and functional specification. The non-rhetorical rhetorical genre, outliving the

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rhetorical ones for just that reason, it has neither a clear practical function (like a report, a polemical speech, or a legal opinion) nor, on the other hand, the conventions of literature (like a poem or a novel). Its judicious amateurism signifies detachment; it is the voice, not of someone who is *doing* anything, but precisely of a spectator. It is the practice of education as opposed to training; it prepares the student writer, not for the accomplishment of any particular task, but for membership of that idealised bourgeois public sphere in which disparate private subjects interact harmoniously on the basis of a shared discourse - a universe, not of reason exactly (since that suggests an un-English rigour unresponsive to intuition, sentiment, custom) but of *reasonableness*. (1)

How on earth did this leisurely, stylized form of thinking aloud turn into the millions of anxious words which are scribbled across institutional stationery every summer? The question contains its own answer: the development of the essay is decisively skewed by that of the examination system. The social matrix of the essay form's non-committal cultivation was, after all, the amateurism of the English gentleman; its refusal of functional specificity was the expression of his 'independence' (i.e. the fact that he didn't need to work), and its ambiguous position on the fringes of literature corresponded to the space he needed to preserve between the man of letters and the professional writer. The prestige of this genteel model of the educated man was itself part of an increasingly anachronistic educational structure, which by the early Victorian years was visibly failing to produce an adequately literate middle class. The gentry were more or less provided for by a handful of public schools and by the ancient universities, and there was patchy but surprisingly widespread elementary education for the poor; but as Britain turned itself into an industrial and imperial state with a rapidly expanding set of public and private bureaucracies, 'middle-class education' was sharply identified as a critical unsolved problem (see Roach, 1971 ch.2). The solution, adopted in a rush during the 1850s, was competitive public examination. This, it was hoped, would have two benign effects. It would serve as a meritocratic mode of recruitment for the civil service and the professions. And it would also be an indirect means of raising standards in the schools which catered for the sons (and to some extent the daughters) of the rapidly expanding middle class.

Since a public examination was required to form the end of a wide variety of different curricula, and the beginning of a wide variety of different careers, its own language and categories had to be designed with a high degree of generality. It was not supposed to be assessing particular course contents or particular vocational aptitudes, because that would be unfair to some candidates, and the whole social point of the reform was that it should replace the manifestly unfair mechanisms of advancement (patronage, nepotism) which had existed before. It was supposed to be what it eventually came to be called - a *general* certificate of education. The performance required of the candidate should show, not only (not even primarily) his ownership of a systematised body of knowledge, but also his personal qualities, his general level of intellectual culture, even his moral character. (There is much talk, in the initial discussions, of the desirability of an exam which rewards steady industry and the capacity to defer satisfactions: the discourse of examining was from the start, as it has remained, conspicuously moralistic (Roach, p.31). The very earliest papers in English literature ask candidates to assess the characters of various figures in Shakespeare's plays. The continuity of the preoccupation with character across more than a century is startling, and is arguably a production of the examination's structure in its manifest content - I am asked to do to Laertes what the examiner is doing to me.) The sorts of discrimination that were needed are particularly visible in the competitive examination for the state bureaucracy. This was pioneered in the Indian Civil Service, and only later extended to the more conservative home departments. For India, in the immediate aftermath to the insurrection of 1857, there was an urgent need to turn the commercial rapacity of the East India Company into something like an imperial *mission civilisatrice*; consequently, the selection was devised in the hope of staffing the Indian administration with competent exponents of English civilisation. In the mark scheme adopted in 1858, the most heavily weighted subject is English (Roach, p.196).

Once again, the appropriate medium for assessing this mixture of intellectual, moral and cultural qualities appears to be the essay. Its abstention from functional specificity corresponds to the intended openness of the exam; its informality promises the examiner a transparent window

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through which we can see the quality of the candidate's mind; the notional voice of the essay (the educated man, at ease with a wide range of subjects) is exactly the persona to which the candidate aspires. So it was natural that the essay form should be the staple of the exam system and of the curricula which were increasingly shaped by it. However, in being adopted for this purpose, the essay is subjected to a series of ironic reversals which go some way to explain the contradictory animal we have today.

As I've suggested, the essay is the literary sign of functional innocence. It is, in theory, the pure embodiment of writing as such; and as Foucault says of the myth of the writer, one writes 'as a universal consciousness, a free subject. . . counterposed to those intellectuals who [are] merely *competent instances* in the service of the state or capital - technicians, magistrates, teachers' (ed. Rabinow, 1986 p.68). But when the essay is co-opted for the exam system, this gratuitousness is converted into its opposite; the essay becomes the *most* functional kind of writing, even cynically so; the essayist's free disinterestedness is called for in a real context of compulsion and self-interest. The candidates are, after all, precisely seeking to qualify as 'technicians, magistrates, teachers'. In other words, the 'naturalness' of the essay as a discourse is illusory. The candidate is being asked to play a role, to write *as if* from a subject position quite different from the one she is put in by being asked.

This concealed injunction to pretend makes writing essays much more difficult than it's supposed to be. Public examination was explicitly introduced as an opening-out of access to preferment - the belated arrival

in the class-bound structure of English public life of the principle of the *carriere ouverte aux talents*. The essay fits into this ideology as the universal written form of thought. To do a Latin prose you have to have been to a certain kind of school, to compose a speech you have to be familiar with the social situations which call for speeches, to write a poem you have to be 'creative' - but the essay is accessible to everybody to the extent that they can think and use English, and therefore it is the only fair medium of assessment. Such is the proposition; but anyone who has taught GCSE knows that it isn't true. And not only is it untrue empirically; it's *necessarily* untrue, since the framework of competitive examination has to be divisive or else it's pointless. If it really did happen in some miraculous way that every teenager in the country mastered the elusive bundle of skills called 'being able to write essays', then it would be necessary to redefine the task so that enough people failed. In other words, the essay is a structurally contradictory sign: it has value *both* because it is universally human *and* because only some of us can do it.

The practical form of these contradictions is a perpetual mixed message to the student writer about how much autonomy she is expected to show. On the one hand, we want her own thoughts and responses: independent thought, freshness, originality, are not only permitted, but tirelessly demanded in examiners' reports. On the other hand, there's an equal insistence that every assertion be supported by evidence of intensive and extensive reading, that the language of the essay be 'appropriate', that the handling of contentious issues be balanced - in short, that the expression of independence of mind be thoroughly permeated by signs of conformity to an academic code of practice. (2) The inevitable stress signal of this tension is plagiarism. Bewildered or exhausted by the requirement that she should be herself and simultaneously approximate to a model outside herself, the candidate produces the contradiction in the form of deception - she *literally* adopts the voice of another as her own. The difference between this prohibited form of pretence and the pretence which is essential to the genre is tiny; the boundary between them is policed with predictable anxiety. In the 1860s, within a few years of the institution of public examinations in literature, examiners are already voicing worries about the excessive use of annotated school editions as cribs (see Roach, p.161).

This tension is not an incidental drawback, but the whole point of setting essays. In learning to write in this way, students are drawn into a complex negotiation between individuality and authority, message and code, their own words and the words of others. That is, they construct themselves as speaking subjects *within* the approved discourse of a cultural elite. The idea is that these two motives should coalesce, such that expressing one's individuality and affirming one's

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membership of the elite become effectively identical. That, you could say, is what ideology means.

Inhabiting the *role* of the essay-writer is the aspect of the task which makes it difficult because it is the aspect that is not spelt out. (3) When a student writes 'as' a theatre reviewer for a newspaper, or 'as' a servant in Macbeth's castle, the role-playing element is obvious; it's understood that she is not these things, but is pretending for the purpose of the exercise. When she writes an essay, she adopts a role in a quite similar way, imagining being the kind of person who writes essays, inscribing herself in the tradition of educated-thinking-aloud which I've tried to sketch. But the role is much harder to imagine (what kind of person *does* write essays? In what sort of relationship with what kind of reader?) and besides, it doesn't *admit* that it's an imaginary role at all, but presents itself, as we've seen, precisely as the one form of writing which doesn't entail a persona, but represents the unmediated presence of the thinking mind itself, the real thing. The instruction to write an essay could thus be said to contain a double bind - it's not simply 'pretend you are x', but 'pretend that you are x and *do not know* that it is a pretence'. Double binds, as Gregory Bateson has explained, are the engines of schizophrenia and creativity; this one seems to promote a bit of both (Bateson, 1973 pp.242-9).

Your attitude to the essay as a teaching form depends on whether it's the schizophrenia or the creativity that strikes you the more forcibly. What Foucault is saying, in the piece I already quoted, is that the role of the 'writer' is itself obsolete; that intellectuals 'have become used to working, not in the modality of the "universal", the "exemplary", the "just-and-true-for-all", but with specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them (housing, the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, family, and sexual relations)'. That would be to say: the essay is, as its history suggests, the communication form of the bourgeois public sphere, and since that sphere doesn't exist any more, but has fragmented into a lot of domestic and professional private spheres, getting students to 'write' (to construct themselves as articulate subjects within an imaginary public sphere) is a futile and constraining exercise in nostalgia, as if one should teach young people the art of classical parliamentary oratory, or the table manners of Edwardian Belgravia.

Two things make me hesitate before saying that. One is the familiar experience of striking that sort of post modern, anti-humanist attitude and then looking around to see who your friends are. Essay-writing, you may say, the alleged discursive space of disinterested critical thought, is compromised, fraudulent, a bit ridiculous, artificial, readerless, elitist, and designed to address a public sphere which no longer exists. But you would be saying all this in a situation defined by the fact that the Conservative Party recently won yet another election on the basis of a politics which precisely denies the reality of a public sphere and the possibility of disinterested critical thought, and which systematically trashes any institution that seeks to develop either the one or the other. Discourse in that politics is most certainly not in 'the modality of the "universal", the "exemplary", the "just-and-true-for-all" '; and there have been plenty of signs that if teachers and academics in the humanities become the next enemy within (as the Right clearly intends) then the programme will be to suppress our universalist pretensions and concentrate our efforts on the theoretically innocent business of producing Foucault's 'competent instances in the service of the state or capital'. In the face of that cynical instrumentalism, this is not the moment for elegant deconstruction of the weapons we have to resist it - even if the weapons are contradictory and anachronistic.

The other inhibiting thought is that the various people I'm using here to help me think - Foucault, Habermas, historians of education - have communicated their ideas to me in the form of essays, and I'm trying to do the same for you. When I want to understand something which is verbally or conceptually difficult, I write about it, and what I write pretty much resembles an essay. In other words, I do believe, in practice, and whatever I say, that the essay is 'the real thing'. If that is a prejudice emerging from my own education, it is nevertheless a prejudice which experience of my own work and that of my colleagues daily confirms. If we are going, in a serious way, to push the boat out into uncharted seas of linguistic diversity, I think we should be on it, and not leave it to our students to find their way. Or to put it the other way round: I'm

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suspicious of the democratic credentials of a pedagogy which doesn't seek, as a priority, to give its students access to its own metalanguage.

To find the pressure point in the ideology of the essay, we have to look in a slightly different place. It's clear from everything I have said that the form, in its different manifestations, is consistently and definingly individualistic. 'It is myself that I portray', Montaigne had said; and of course this is still more true of the examination candidate, the sole purpose of whose efforts is to distinguish herself from all the others. (Examination questions don't need to be *good questions* in any general sense; they need to be good discriminators - that is, to produce the individual distinctiveness of the candidate in measurable form.) Whereas many other discursive forms (from newspapers to devised theatre scripts, and from pop videos to scientific research papers) are collectively produced, the essay reflects both its bourgeois origins and its current administrative functions by insisting on individual authorship. Whatever reservations it may have about other elements of the essay tradition, the present regime in education is enthusiastic about this one, obsessed as it is with the project of placing individual schools, teachers and students in league tables which suppress every relationship except that of competition. In this situation, one thing we can do with the questionable legacy of the essay is to find ways (in every forum, from the classroom to the research seminar) of writing the things together. This is difficult: the whole cultural identity of the essay tends to make it so. But for precisely that reason, its parameters are such that they can be radically transformed, and perhaps rejuvenated, by moving the desks together.

Notes

1 See Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (Verso, 1984) ch.1, the theoretical source of which is Jiirgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trs. Thomas Burger (MIT Press, 1989)

2 Any English teacher can confirm these criteria by introspection, but see, for example, John Clanchy and Brigid Ballard, *How to Write Essays* (Longman, 1981)

3 For an extremely clear account of invisible 'ground rules' in English lessons, see Yanina Sheeran and Douglas Barnes, *School Writing* (Open University Press, 1991), ch.4

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