Zeitschrift: Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata

Herausgeber: Association suisse de littérature générale et comparée

Band: - (2009)

Heft: 40: Probleme der Gattungstheorie = Problèmes de la théorie des genres littéraires = Problems of genre theory

Artikel: Genre, voice, identity : nonfiction prose and the personal essay

Autor: Austenfeld, Thomas

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006335

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Thomas Austenfeld

Genre, Voice, Identity

Nonfiction Prose and the Personal Essay

The venerable form of the essay, a genre one encounters from time to time in French and German literature but more frequently in Anglophone writing, has undergone significant changes in the last quarter of the 20th century and shows signs of developing further in our day. The term "essay" itself suggests the temporary character and the mutability of the form; however, it is by no means formless, undefinable, or protean. Rather, whether employed in teaching settings as a tool for apprentice writers or in periodicals as a tool for rumination and opinion, the essay observes distinctive norms. In a standard reference article, Lothar Cerny notes that the essay is inherently unsystematic and dialogical, and that both "fathers" of the genre, Montaigne and Bacon, agreed at least on the following:

> In die Gattung des Essay gingen mit Montaigne Vitalität, Persönlichkeit, die Konkretheit der Lebenserfahrung ein. […] Der Essay teilt nicht nur mit, sondern "zelebriert" die Mitteilung selbst. […] Für beide Väter der Gattung […] gilt […] dass die Form den Inhalt spiegelt und in beiden die Persönlichkeit des Essayisten ihren Ausdruck findet.[1]

Various forms of "celebrating" the self have in recent years resuscitated the essay in all its variations. A convergence of two historical trends has contributed – though not exclusively – to the increasing visibility of the essay. First, there has been what is now referred to as the "memory boom" of the last decades of the twentieth century.[2]

1 Lothar Cerny, "Essay", *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Basel and Stuttgart, Schwabe, 1971–2007, Bd. 2, p. 746.

2 In his study *9/11. The Culture of Commemoration,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006, David Simpson scrutinizes how the attack on the Twin Towers and other American targets is memorialized. He describes how 9/11 memorials have given new impetus to studying events from the victims' point of view, a practice which before 9/11 had been absorbed into the general "memory boom" of the last part of the century but which, according to Simpson, had made the Holocaust its paradigmatic event in such a way that it "had before 9/11 been widely

More and more stories, largely of suffering and disenfranchisement, often told by women, frequently from locations that previously had no access to publication, are being brought to the attention of the reading public.[3] Sidonie Smith, a leading scholar in the field, calls such texts "autobiographical manifestos," clearly a sub-specialty of the essay already heavily tinged by a personal element.[4] Second, the emergence of the "weblog" or "blog," a form of online communication open to almost anyone, has generated essayistic forms amenable to the unfettered expression of the self. While by far not all of these texts pretend to literariness, the essay is more visible than it used to be, and nonfiction prose has gained academic attention and theoretical interest in consequence, even as academic writers themselves have newly embraced the essay both as a form of expression and an object of study. Along with a proliferation of essays, then, more essays upon the essay have been written. Among the best of these is still Geoffrey H. Hartman's *Minor Prophecies: The Literary Essay in the Culture Wars*, which traced the emerging distinction between "learned specialist" and "public critic" (Preface) as early as 1991, paying attention along the way to some essayists' resistance to theory.[5] Today, essays newly occupy contested theoretical terrain.

felt to be approaching its exhaustion" (15). 9/11 gave the world different victims and thus the need for different memorials. The "memory boom" has affected the historical sciences as well; see Jay Winter, "The Memory Boom in Contemporary Historical Studies," *Raritan: A Quarterly Review*, 21.1, Summer 2001, pp. 52–66.

3 See, for example, such celebrated cases as Rigoberta Menchu, *I, Rigoberta;* Jung Chang, *Wild Swans*; Rita and Jackie Huggins, *Auntie Rita*; Ruth Underhill and Maria Chona, *Papago Woman* (reissued 1979). See also Kathleen Mullen Sands's article, "Collaboration or Colonialism: Text and Process in Native American Women's Autobiographies," *MELUS* 22.4, 1997, pp. 39-59. For a different take on "happy autobiographies" in academic environments, see Thomas Austenfeld, "Looking for Academic Family: Learning and Teaching in David Levin's Exemplary Elders and Frank McCourt's Teacher Man," Prose Studies, 31.3, 2009, pp. 181–189.

4 Sidonie Smith, "Autobiographical Manifestos," ed. by Sidonie *Smith and Julia Watson, Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader,* Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, p. 435.

5 Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Minor Prophecies. The Literary Essay in the Culture Wars*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1991.

Some of the new terms under discussion such as "Scholarly Personal Narrative" or SPN and "Personal Academic Writing"[6] yoke together either the literary or the academic with "the personal," often in an attempt to adduce authenticity at the expense of verifiability. This discourse values "the human" in the humanities and is generally skeptical about the generalizability of experience, a stance which, in my view, unnecessarily weakens the persuasive power of the personal essay. Scholars such as G. Douglas Atkins implicitly make the opposite argument: Atkins chooses *Through Experience to Truth* as the subtitle of his 2005 book *Tracing the Essay*, thus privileging the instrumental nature of experience without assigning it absolute value. The term "fourth genre" – to be placed besides prose, drama, and poetry – is also current. Since 1998, a periodical devoted to nothing but nonfiction writing, appropriately titled *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*, has been published by Michigan State University Press. Now employed regularly and apparently with professional pride, "The Fourth Genre" is also the subtitle of Stephen Minot's theory-cum-practice workbook, *Literary Nonfiction*. From among the many terminological choices, I shall use the deliberately descriptive, non-evaluatory term "nonfiction prose" in my attempt to describe the history of the genre, assess its recent modifications, and illustrate its continuing effectiveness.

While the modern history of the essay goes back to Montaigne and thus gives to France the honor of its invention, the English-speaking world has consistently exhibited a particular fondness for this textual form. The brief history of the essay I will sketch in a moment will neglect the great English essayists in favor of those American writers who have led the way towards the newer forms of the genre. The present-day discussions about the essay outlined in the opening paragraphs help readers consider the possibilities that the nonfiction essay, always personal to a degree, offers in bringing both scholarship and opinion to an audience, even while encouraging the members of the audience to pick up the pen themselves and write back. The mo-

6 Robert Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power Of Personal Narrative,* New York, Teachers College Press, 2004. Candace Spigelman, *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

model essay accomplishes these tasks by merging the identity of its writer with the material that forms the content. In other words, an essay begins with a personal occasion rendered vividly in a recognizable voice, but it results in – if not a universal truth – at least a truth that offers some satisfaction to a great number of readers and thus creates a stronger bond of identity between writer and reader. The concepts of voice and identity, then, mark the key features of the genre. The tensions and potentialities of the personal essay in conversation with the traditional and respected literary genres recognized in the academy – poetry, drama, prose and all their sub-genres – warrant our attention and give rise to questions that are relevant to comparatist scholars.

A brief history and a discussion of two key examples will be followed by a series of theses on the nonfiction essay as a tool of inquiry for the writer, whether that writer is a professional academic or a student of literature. A fuller understanding of the operations of the nonfiction essay may well result in increasing students' "ownership" of their prose and their intellectual endeavors. Yet, as suggested above in the implicit debate between Spigelman and Atkins over the question of personal authenticity and the place of truth, a careful middle ground may be most desirable: avoiding universal claims on the one hand and non-communicable personalism on the other should result in the freedom of inquiry that is the hallmark of the best of humanist work.

In literary studies, and in the humanities more generally, scientific objectivity as practiced in the natural sciences is not just undesirable, it simply should not be, by and large, the concern of our discipline. One traditional form of academic scholarship works by argument alone, but literature – and that is what is at stake in this debate – does not work this way. Literature does not normally argue. At best, it suggests, and often, it entices. Sir Philip Sidney observed quite correctly in his *Apology for Poetry*, a late 16th century text often considered the first work of English literary criticism, "Now for the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth"[7] – unlike the historian who is bound to facts. Yet for Sidney, poetry (which he calls *poesy*)

7 Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry or The Defense of Poesy*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd, London, Thomas Nelson, 1965, 123.38. Sidney wrote this probably in 1581, the text was published in 1595.

also surpasses philosophy in its pleasing characteristics and is hence the best textual form to arouse virtue in the reader. In consequence, then, every utterance of poesy, or fiction, or essay may be described as an invitation from the writer to the reader to share for a span of time the writer's view of the world. And even though "nonfiction prose" contains the qualifier "nonfiction" which may threaten to remove the personal from the discussion again, the genre I here explain belongs to *literary* nonfiction and thus differs qualitatively from utilitarian instructions for operating a microwave oven.[8] Literary nonfiction, then, shines with the writer's or critic's self even as the writer engages a topic other than himself or herself. Historical incident, place, reflection, opinion, biographical sketch, and personal experience[9] are all valid fields of investigation for literary nonfiction, but there is always a writer with a voice writing the text. Every scholarly article and every student paper should be informed by such a recognizable voice. Otherwise, our writing might as well employ the passive constructions appropriate to lab reports which depend on repeatability, not uniqueness. Yet the passive voice is for the most part anathema in English-speaking criticism, excepting only dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference works.

The "I" who claims a voice in an essay is, of course, a persona of the author. Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing in pre-gender-conscious days, called this persona "Man Thinking" in his 1837 essay, "The American Scholar."[10] "Man Thinking," properly updated to "thinking person," is a valid shorthand definition of the desired persona of the essayist. "Man Thinking" is precisely how Michel de Montaigne started writing.

The essay as it is known today originated in 16th-century France, with Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*, pieces he claimed were intended for his own amusement but which, in fact, laid the groundwork for a genre that would develop slowly. Montaigne published his essays in 1580, one year before Sidney wrote his *Apology*, and he begins in a

8 Stephen Minot, *Literary Nonfiction: The Fourth Genre*, Upper Saddle River, Prentice-Hall, 2003 offers cogent explanations of the difference between literary and utilitarian nonfiction, contrasting the form with reports, scholarly writing, editorials, and other forms of journalism (pp. 2–5).

9 The list is Minot's, Chapter Two.

10 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," *Essays and Lectures*, New York, Library of America, 1983, p. 54.

manner both self-effacing and downright arrogant: "Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book."[11] Montaigne's essays are irreverent, whimsical, and above all, concrete in their language and their references. "Flaubert described Montaigne's style as a delicious fruit that fills your mouth and throat," and "Emerson found him 'wild and savory as sweet fern'."[12] The genre migrated to England in the late 17th and 18th centuries and took on above all two forms: the didactic essay in poetry and prose as practiced by John Dryden and Alexander Pope and the self-consciously irrelevant-sounding yet meaningfully witty periodical publication in journals diffidently named *The Tatler, The Spectator, The Idler*. Samuel Johnson and, later, William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb developed the essay further. Mary Wollstonecraft employed the essay for social analysis and advocacy, and British essayists of the 19th century from Thomas Carlyle to Walter Pater and Matthew Arnold would write didactic essays in the realms of social mores, art, education, and public welfare. In these writers, the notion of voice is a key element of the form of the essay. Carlyle, Pater, and Arnold have such distinctive styles that an educated reader will likely recognize a passage from their writing even without authorial attribution. In the 20th century, British writers continued to use the essay for political purposes but also infused a great deal of personality into each piece, from George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" to Virginia Woolf's "On Being Ill." G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc used the essay in part in support of religious and political argument and must not go unmentioned in the ranks of great essayists.

American essays took a slightly different turn. The encouragement of a deliberative, democratic, egalitarian culture at least among the literate and wealthy power brokers after the Revolution of 1775 spawned a flurry of dueling essays, of which the Federalist Papers are the most prominent. These are some 85 pieces containing arguments for and against the various aspects of the proposed Constitution of the United States, composed by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay, and published in various New York State newspapers between 1787 and 1788. Comparatists may be intrigued by the fact

11 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, tr. Donald M. Frame, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 3.

12 Donald M. Frame, "Introduction," *The Complete Essays of Montaigne,* Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995, p. vii.

that at about the same time, of course, Immanuel Kant, Moses Mendelssohn, and others wrote essays in response to the question, "Was ist Aufklärung?" Such a straightforward question, seeking a definition and explanation, is one characteristic gesture of the essay, but only in American essays does the particular occasion that causes the essay to come into existence reliably establish a linkage between an investigation of that occasion and the infusion of the writer's personal, sometimes idiosyncratic relationship to the occasion at hand. The question that originates the essay is key both in understanding and in teaching the genre. Known as the "essay prompt," the originating question must invite and unite the writer's personality with the topic at hand. But where Kant and Mendelssohn answered their prompt, "Was ist Aufklärung?" with a definition, the Federalists answered theirs with political appeals. Kant writes, reasonably enough, "Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit."[13] An American essayist would surely have written, more emphatically and with personal reference, "I first understood what Enlightenment means when I took part in the Boston Tea Party."

In the 1830s, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau gave important impulses to the development of the American essay. Still revolutionary in a sense – given Emerson's intellectual break with the Unitarian church and his ensuing transcendentalism, and Thoreau's initiation of what today might be called the Green movement – the mid-19th century American essay took a decided turn to the personal. Says Thoreau, with his characteristic mixture of modesty and irony, on the opening page of *Walden* (1854):

> In most books the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this, it will be retained. [...] I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body [sic] else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience.[14]

13 Immanuel Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?", *Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. by Wilhlem Weischedel, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005, Bd. VI, 53.

14 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, Oxford, Oxford World Classics, 1997, p. 5.

Emerson adds, ringingly, in "Self-Reliance" (1841): "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string."[15] "Else, to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another."[16] Thoreau's liberating gesture towards the "I" has given rise to the identity-finding and identity-forming properties of the contemporary essay. Emerson, writing 15 years before Thoreau, still used the stylized "we" in his appeal to self-reliance. But when Thoreau justifies himself by appeal to the "narrowness of [his] experience," he at the same time *authorizes* experience as a valid source of meaningful writing. Candace Spigelman extends this claim in her 2004 book, *Personally Speaking*, to say that experience is perhaps more to be trusted than a rationality we now understand as socially constructed. Citing Suzanne Clark, Spigelman continues:

> Since all knowledge is [artificially] constructed, we have no recourse to the coherent identity of a subject that can define "the rational." As such, we must acknowledge the mutuality of logic, audience, and speaker, and the value of sentiment as an expression of shared concern within a rhetorical community.[17]

Such an exclusively constructionist view errs on the side of personal relevance, giving short shrift to the verifiable facts of the essay, yet it helps the reader in demystifying the voice of the writer. Even the most magisterial-sounding scholarly essay was not written by a disembodied voice but is the product of a writer who addresses an audience, chooses a genre, and observes conventions of language. Once we unmask the specter of neutral writing, realize that good writing is always interested writing, and from there argue back to character and voice, we find that we are going back past the Enlightenment to classical antiquity. The kind of personal writing characteristic of the essay, more moderately claimed, may well "operate in the service of argument as a kind of ethos-building strategy, whereby the narrator establishes his or her credibility by means of a voice or persona with which the audience might identify [...] or trust [...] and thus be per-

15 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *Essays and Lectures*, New York, Library of America, 1983, p. 260.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

17 Spigelman, *Personally Speaking*, p. 18.

suaded."[18] The role of ethos in persuasive writing has been known since Aristotle, along with pathos and logos, and it was Aristotle, too, who said in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, "We must attend, then to the undemonstrated remarks and beliefs of the experienced and older people or of intelligent people, no less than to demonstrations. For these people see correctly because experience has given them their eye."[19]

The personal turn persisted into the 20th century, in which the essay became the staple of American college curricula. Nonfiction essays are the primary reading material in compulsory composition courses all over the United States, ranging from high school to university. It is in the essay, not primarily in the poem or the novel, that Americans face squarely the diversities, the injustices, the broken promises, and the inconsistencies of American life. The "general reader," if such a postulated entity still exists, reads essays in *The New Yorker, Harper's, The Atlantic Monthly*, periodicals which still enjoy sizeable readerships. Essays published in those periodicals continue a tradition of American self-criticism – beginning with John Winthrop and blossoming with Henry David Thoreau – that allows the critical reader glimpses into the *plura* that are the strands making up the apparently uncategorizable *unum* of the present-day United States.

Reception and production of essays are intimately linked in American education: secondary and tertiary education in the United States has always advocated the writing of personal responses over the writing of critical summations or argumentative papers. 19th century McGuffey Readers established the gold standard in this respect. Today, high school students and college students at any level do not just read scores of essays, they also write dozens of them – in response to literary texts, social and political phenomena, their feelings, their environment, and any other imaginable topic. All these essays have in common only the rudimentary requirement that they all have *a point*. The point, to be defined as clearly as possible, is that imagined place from which the writer personally, individually, unmistakably sees the world that he or she is then casting into prose. From this point, and through many iterations of drafts, rewrites, and final essays, the writer develops a voice. In light of what I said above about recognizing the neutral, magisterial article as only another rhetorical trope, an essay

18 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
19 Quoted by Spigelman, *ibid.*, p. ix.

trope, an essay with a point, written in a voice "owned" by the writer, actually makes a contribution to honesty. With a voice, the indispensable ethos of an essay is established.

Since the ethos of the essay strongly foregrounds the particulars of an individual life, in particular that of the author and his or her perspective on the event described, essays are lively examples of identity politics in action. While academic discourse now routinely accounts for identity markers such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, the relevance of these categories in people's lives is not immediately accessible to most university students. If, however, students and other readers see these categories informing the stance of an essayist, then in a moment of recognition the essay becomes the tool that gives readers the wherewithal to use a literary voice in which to display and interrogate their local version of identity politics. By "envisioning the stranger's heart",[20] as G. Douglas Atkins puts it, essays go out into the world in search of intersubjective connections. As intersubjective appeals, essays remain the life-blood of American culture. They fulfill much the same function in American counterculture, where they are the contemporary versions of the time-honored Jeremiad of the 18th century. In the place held by Jonathan Edwards in the 18th century and Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 19th, America has Joan Didion and Barbara Ehrenreich, Susan Sontag and Gary Wills. And as the election season of 2008 demonstrated, essays in the forms of personal memoirs, "life stories" and testimonials in the blogosphere became potent tools of shaping public discourse at a time when nearly all participants in the Western world have access to a computer and the internet.

For Americans, the essay has a special value in the collective history of the country. Together, essays answer the existential question Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur posed in 1782, "What, then, is an American?" Essays have not only answered that question, one at a time, they also occasionally become the lasting record of an event in the national consciousness. Morris Dickstein observed recently, vis-à-vis the lasting significance of Norman Mailer's 1968 history/novel *The Armies of the Night*: "Today, some forty years later, we would

20 G. Douglas Atkins, *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2005, p. 3.

barely recall the Pentagon march if not for Mailer's book" (128).[21] Going further back in American history, much of the present-day understanding of the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846 is predicated on readers' recollection of a single, widely-read essay by Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," which offers Thoreau's explanation for refusing to pay taxes in support of a war he considers unjustified and immoral. Essays are ruggedly resistant, in ways not immediately obvious. Because of their particular place in literary history as well as their insistence on the linking of voice with identity, they constitute the genre that bridges the gap between literature that one reads and literature that one may write oneself.

An examination of two essays written almost 70 years apart will show how voice and personal identity remain salient features that speak to readers across the barriers of space, time, and the written word. Students asked to read these essays will invariably discover their kinship with certain features of the writers' identities, thus being incited to emulate their work. Essays, then, combine in themselves identity-finding and identity-forming properties.

My first example is E.B. White's iconic 1941 essay, "Once More to the Lake."[22] This text, largely unknown to European readers, is familiar to just about every college-educated American. Rare indeed is the anthology in which it is not reprinted. The narrator's longing to re-live his childhood memories of a lake holiday induces a confusion about his identity in which he seems to become his own father observing his son – or his former self. Considering the exigencies of an age concerned with identities, this essay has shortcomings: it has an exclusively male cast, male imagery from the fishing rods all the way

21 Morris Dickstein, "How Mailer became 'Mailer': The Writer as Private and Public Character," *The Mailer Review*, 1.1, 2007, p. 128.

22 Originally published in the October, 1941 issue of *Harper's Magazine* (553-556) in White's regular column "One Man's Meat," the essay is reprinted in virtually every American college text anthology. It is one of 55 texts chosen for *The Best American Essays of the Century*, eds. Joyce Carol Oates and Robert Atwan, New York, Mariner Books, 2001; a selection designated "Literary Nonfiction" by Oates. An online version of "Once More to the Lake" with a few unfortunate transliteration errors is available at: www.moonstar.com/~acpjr/Blackboard/Common/Essays/OnceLake.html (accessed January 5, 2010).

to the procreative suggestiveness of the final paragraph, and some petulant observations about outboard motors and tarred roads and the disappearance of the third track on the walking path made by animals. It is a piece of the 1940s. But looking past these, one can discover the masterful way in which White invites his readers to remember with him the magic of a lake in Maine, the seemingly unchanging nature of life at summer camp, the boat, the fishing, the smell of the cabin in the early morning. Employing both precise description (the minnows and their shadows, the dragonfly on the tip of the rod) and large metaphors (the "holy spot," the "Cathedral" of the lake in early morning, the melodrama of the thunderstorm, the sentimental ode to "summertime" in which ordinary syntax gives way to a romantic overflow of spontaneous feeling, the invocation of changelessness in the country store, the joker with the umbrella in the water), White draws readers into sharing an experience and connecting with him. But the essay does not end there. Changing places, father and son enact, unbeknownst to them as yet, more than the ritual of *raising* the next generation; they also enact the ritual of *erasing* the previous generation. Those among us who grew up in Northern climes can remember the sensation of pulling up a wet bathing suit and feeling a momentary chill. Few of us, I warrant, can do what White does with this scene:

I watched him, his hard little body, skinny and bare, saw him wince slightly as he pulled up around his vitals the small, soggy, icy garment. As he buckled the swollen belt suddenly my groin felt the chill of death."[23]

In addition to the sibilant alliterations and assonances in this phrase, "icy" in particular sends strong signals; it foreshadows and authenticates the "chill of death," otherwise a dead metaphor, that will conclude the story. The narrator has been so lost in his reverie of his own youth that he has failed to think the logic of his experience through to its conclusion: if he has become his father, he is now marked for death. In the middle of the summer, the "chill" is particularly effective in suggesting that fall, and with it death, are close by. The attentive replication of details that are available to countless Americans who have had holiday experiences like this one make the

23 *Ibid.*, concluding paragraph.

essay at the same time an invitation to readers to test their voices in turn and begin to write.

White's essay meets the standard, general definition of literary nonfiction, such as Stephen Minot gives it: "Literary nonfiction is distinguished by three basic characteristics: It is based on actual events, characters, and places; it is written with special concern for language; and it tends to be more informal and personal than other types of nonfiction writing".[24] American college students who pick up this text know already who E.B. White is. He wrote children's books, among them the beloved *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web*. He is one of the authors of the reference work known as "Strunk and White," more properly *The Elements of Style*, the grammar and style manual that prescribed clear writing for three generations of students in the 20th century. Academic readers may know in addition that he is the husband of Katharine White, the temperamental and influential fiction editor for *The New Yorker* magazine from 1925 to 1960. And some even know that their son Joel became a naval architect and boat builder. All this extraneous information suggests strongly that the events related in the text do take their origin in lived experience, and that the writer has taken great care in shaping them literarily. This is literary nonfiction.

The setting, subject matter, and intention of a second example text couldn't be more different at first glance. In looking at Garrison Keillor's 2009 essay, titled with deceptive understatement, "A Day to Remember,"[25] readers are alerted by the title to another apparent wistful memorial, this one of Barack Obama's Inauguration Day. But where White has the nuclear family and a spot in nature, Keillor has the nation and a spot on the Washington Mall. In lieu of personal intimations of death, Keillor offers national aspirations to glory. Garrison Keillor, an author and radio host every American knows, is the personality behind the "Prairie Home Companion" franchise. Storyteller and novelist, equipped with the tools of "identity politics" that touch his radio listeners, he has for over 30 years extolled the life

24 Minot, *Literary Nonfiction*, p. 1.

25 The text of the essay can be found on the website of Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* Radio show, at: www.publicradio.org/columns/prairiehome/the_old_scout/archives/2009/01/20/a_day_to_remember.shtml (accessed January 5, 2010).

of common folk on the Northern prairies, especially people of Scandinavian ancestry. Syndicated on the not-for-profit National Public Radio network, Keillor reaches millions of listeners through his weekly shows. As "A Day to Remember" demonstrates, he is also an effective essayist. For the two million people who were on the National Mall to witness the inauguration of President Obama, he captures in this essay the essence of a feeling that one could only get as a member of the crowd. He starts with the predictable, namely the fact that black people in America finally see one of their own take the oath of office. There is the predictable awe at the taking of the oath and all the attendant pomp and circumstance. But the essay does something else, and this is what makes it worth reading: Keillor describes the way in which the crowd suddenly realizes that the "Former Occupant," always capitalized but never named, is actually leaving the premises at this very moment. "The crowd stopped and stared, a little stunned at the reality of it." Shrewdly, he constructs a scene that implicitly recalls so many other scenes in recent American history in which a helicopter figures prominently: Keillor does not need to say this; readers see in their mind's eye the helicopter that took Richard Nixon away from the South Lawn. They see the last helicopter leaving the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. All these helicopters took people away from a scene they had somehow contributed to creating but could or did no longer control; a setting that was now to be given over to a mass of people and would no longer remain in the possession of one individual. And Keillor now adds another emblematic helicopter to this American history:

> When the blades started turning, the cheering got louder, and when the chopper lifted up above the Capitol and we saw it in the sky heading for the airport, a million jubilant people waved and hollered for all they were worth. It [*nota bene!*] was the most genuine, spontaneous, universal moment of the day.

The inauguration of Barack Obama, ostensibly the most important event of the day, is here eclipsed by the departure of the "Former Occupant." And yet, as in White's essay, we see the drama of father and son being played out. Here is a metaphorical father being retired by the American people. Again invoking the imagery of ice, as did E. B. White, Keillor turns to a seasonal image from nature to suggest the enormity of the event. Only this time, the ice does not chill the observer. It is not the ice of death. Instead, it departs, suggesting

spring thaw, not fall. As a native of Minnesota who has seen the headwaters of the Mississippi freeze and thaw every year in turn, Keillor employs a simile that an Arizonan might not immediately understand, but he makes it clear: "It was like watching the ice go out on the river."[26] In other words: water is running again, obstacles are being swept away, winter is over.

Garrison Keillor is identified in the byline as a novelist, not a commentator. "A Day to Remember" is not an editorial. It is not an opinion piece, either in the form of presenting an opinion or arguing to change ours. In fact, it does not argue anything. It is not journalism; it fails to contain the crucial verifiable facts of a journalistic account; the precise day, time, or the famous "inverted pyramid" in its structure. Instead, this account is literary nonfiction. Keillor dwells lovingly on the emotions in the train car that takes him to the event. He takes us through two "big moments"; the appearance of Obama and his taking of the oath. In recording the reactions of the audience when dignitaries appeared on the dais, Keillor reports the pulse of the people. But in precise storytelling fashion Keillor has saved the best for last. The climax is teasingly suggested yet withheld until after the predictable big moments have already passed. Then, as the cheering builds up in successive steps, Keillor veers towards the realization that the departure of the "Former Occupant" is the catalyst that takes the holy, hushed emotions of the inauguration to the raucous release of the departure. Based in fact, grounded in a particular event, this text foregrounds an emotional experience in a crowd told by an individual voice. This is literary nonfiction.

The literary form of the essay has lasted from Montaigne through Thoreau into the present day and can and should be used outside of college settings and beyond the Anglophone realm. I advocate teaching the essay both as a genre for study and as a means of expression. To make this happen, practitioners must guard against dressing up flimsy experiences as universal truth. Teachers must set strict rules about the supple use of precise prose to achieve desired ends. Students must be enabled to see the universal in the particular by reading model after model of good essays. But, most important, teaching must enable students to find their voice and take possession of it, so that it will become their trademark. The student we graduate from

26 Preceding quotations from online text of "A Day to Remember," see note 22.

our universities ought to have a writer's voice that we can recognize even where authorial attribution is missing. It must be the voice of what Emerson called "Man Thinking" and what we should call now "a thinking person," someone with a rhetorical edge, someone with an identity. Essays are the literary form students ought to master irrespective of their professional future and its writerly demands. It is not beyond our scope to teach responsible thinkers who, by shaping their voices and investing their identities into writing, contribute to clear thinking and enliven our discussions. Teaching our students to write good essays means teaching them to be good readers. If they can invite us into sharing, for a span of time, their view of the world, they will be better readers. They will understand literary texts from the inside out, in addition to understanding them analytically from the outside in, another skill we of course need to teach. I believe we cannot afford to do the one without the other if we want to retain the study of literature as a relevant, vibrant, meaningful discipline. The literary nonfiction essay deserves our renewed attention in both the modes of reception and production.

Abstract

Die Gattung des Essays besticht durch ihren unverwechselbaren Tonfall, der seit Montaigne eng mit der Identität des jeweils Schreibenden verknüpft ist. Memoiren und Blogs haben der identitätsbewussten Schreibweise wieder zu Geltung verholfen. Amerikanische Essays, in der republikanischen und individualistischen Kultur der USA geformt, sind gängige Instrumente des amerikanischen Selbstbewusstseins, und zwar sowohl in rezeptiver als auch in produktiver Hinsicht. An zwei beispielhaften Texten von 1941 und 2009 wird demonstriert, wie ein literarischer Essay seine Leserschaft affektiv erreicht. Der Aufsatz endet mit einem Appell zum vermehrten Lehren der identitätsbewussten Schreibweise des Essays.