Dialogue and Critical Discourse

Language, Culture, Critical Theory

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The Essay in English

Readers and Writers in Dialogue

Canons—for conversation.
That their obviousness should procure for them the go-by of some, would not be surprising. That, however, they find their application in those everyday scenes of human existence . . . is reason enough for securing for them a kind reception.

Knickerbocker magazine, September 1836

brief piece on "Talking vs. Conversation" published in a New York periodical he early nineteenth century, an unknown writer linked facility in conversation h adeptness in writing essays. He reached back to Cicero for support of his claim d quoted the Roman orator's "canons for conversation":

—adapt one's manner to the nature of the topic of conversation

—pay close attention to evidence of the state of pleasure and satisfaction of others within the conversation

—be sincere and show respect for those with whom one converses.

most apologetically, the *Knickerbocker* writer prefaced his summary of Cicero's ommendations with the epigraph above that calls attention to both the "obvi-sness" of these rules and their ready applicability to everyday experiences.

This unknown writer had no way of knowing that he stood in a long line of com-ntators—before and after him—who have passed on both rules for conversation d comments about the close ties between conversations and essays. Since the teenth century essayists and editors of collections of essays alike have called at-tion to the dialogic nature of the essay and to the plurality of voices within the m; these commentators have also consistently compared both its form and the nditions of its reception to those of letters, journals, and conversation.

This chapter takes a look at some of these observations and compares them with at we have learned about spoken and written genres from some twentieth-

century literary theorists. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, V. Voloshinov, and members of the Prague school of linguistics, as well as the philosophers H. Paul Grice and John Searle, and the numerous conversational analysts that have followed them, repeatedly link utterances or texts with their contexts—from the immediate interactive situation of a single exchange to the social and economic conditions that permit certain spoken and written genres to be produced.

Through the writings of these scholars of language run many obvious and everyday observations that might "procure for them the go-by of some." They repeat in various ways the "canons" given by Cicero, and they elaborate the contexts that support them as well as the types of texts that emerge from them. Bakhtin, in discussing the problem of speech genres, tells us that the oral dialogue of the salon and of one's primary circle influences literary language, that the complex process of active speech communication extends well beyond speaker and listener and the speech flow, and that responsiveness means more than merely listening and replying to another's talk.[1] Both Voloshinov and Bakhtin remind us repeatedly that we must attend to the "situation" that gives rise to particular varieties of social communication and ensures the conversational character of even those forms (such as diaries and journals) that we think of as inner speech (Voloshinov 1983, 118–19). Prague school linguists and the Russian Formalists acknowledge that the appropriate study of conversation should be sociological and should take into account possibilities for the use of leisure time and the readiness of a capable audience (Tarde, quoted in Mukarovsky 1977, 83–84). Grice (1989) gives us "conversational postulates" that hold conversationalists to being brief, relevant, and sincere. Searle points out that we have both regulative rules, such as those of etiquette, that regulate preexisting activities, such as the salon, table talk, or the conversation. We also have constitutive rules that create certain types of exchanges, such as chess games, and thus allow us to monitor ongoing behaviors within such occasions (1969, 33–38). A host of linguists, discourse analysts, ethnomethodologists, and ethnographers of communication have elaborated on the constitutive order within single occasions of interaction, both spoken and written. They also have laid out the processes within these by which we manage to establish rapport with others, become involved with them and their messages, and make communication a social activity.

To those outside the world of the specialized study of language, much that is within the "findings" of these language scholars is already known by common sense and may therefore meet a "So what's new?" response. The *Knickerbocker* writer expected Cicero's canons to secure "a kind reception" precisely because they were familiar, agreeable, and obvious. And yet the writer lamented that society all-too-often ignored these "simple principles" and indeed that certain types of individuals could be predicted to ignore them and to display "prominent imperfections of the conversational habits." Here, then, is the reality: the rules *are* obvious and lie within everyday experience, yet we *do not* consistently adhere to them. It matters not whether these rules come to us from experience with nonacademic writers and speakers or from those whose professional commitment is to the study of language; that which is obvious about language, because it both does happen and is expected to happen, slips away from our willingness always to hear these rules or to adhere

to those we consistently hold out as ideals. We hasten this slippage when we uproot genres from the situations or relationships upon which they depend.

Two common forms of language reflect this condition. Though both English conversationalists and essayists have repeatedly pointed out the contexts, social conventions, and linguistic features of these two forms, few who have wished to promote or teach these forms in English since the late nineteenth century have acknowledged or adhered to the experts' observations. Social critics, educational reformers, and pedagogues, while calling for ease and excellence in conversation and the essay, have ignored their interdependence, as well as the situations and conventions peculiar to each. Conversation is fundamentally a social process of oral exchange between two or more individuals who share sufficient background knowledge for turn exchanges to take place within a dialogism that takes it for granted that we perceive our own ideas best when set against the perspective of others. It is conversation of this sort that supported the essay into the contemporary era.

Since the late nineteenth century, however, formal education and the journalistic and literary worlds have split in their views of the essay. In both Great Britain and the United States "essay" came to be the term that schoolteachers and professors used to characterize the type of writing students must display before they can pass secondary-school requirements or enter college. The first course that most students take in college is one in which they learn to write "essays" that reflect the orderliness of their thinking and their ability to move from a thesis statement through its support by facts to a summative conclusion. Until students can display their knowledge in such forms, they are excluded from further academic work.

Within journalism, the form is used most often as an editorial frame to reflect the particular political stance of a periodical or the personal revelations of a well-known individual. In numerous literary periodicals, writers, often well-known for their artistry with other literary genres such as novels or poetry, use essays to take up any number of diverse subjects, but most often literary topics.[2]

History

The literary essay in English is a highly vocative text. Essayists themselves, as well as those who recount the history of the form in English, consistently agree that the form has evolved from conversation through letter writing and journal writing to become a highly interactive form that assumes multiple voices including not only the author's personae, but those of the readers as well.

Letters as Friendly Dialogues

During the Renaissance, resurrection of the classical genre of the letter helped prepare the way for the later widespread enthusiasm for the essay (sometimes called the letter-essay). Across Europe it became common to interject letters into long written narratives and occasionally to include within collections of letters classical theoretical writings on the nature and purposes of letters. Renaissance writers recalled the admonitions of Pliny, Cicero, and Quintilian to letter writers regarding

the need for brevity, clarity, familiarity of style, and attention to topic as well as to audience. The editor of Aristotle's letters proposed the letter as "a halved dialogue, or part of a conversation with an absent friend" (Guillen 1986, 77). Classical writers emphasized the dialogue of the letter as a gift of friendship in "loose" writing. Epistolary dialogues avoided didacticism, admitted direct acknowledgment of the personae of both writer and reader, and were both plain and elegant in choice of language. In the Hellenistic world letters on astrology, science, and philosophy developed a strong intertextual quality that gave the writer the opportunity to explore a topic and to test ideas by bringing in multiple texts as supporting voices (Doty 1973, 8). Related to dialogue primarily as an expression of friendship, of "presence," letters were intended to be plain, honest, and revealing of the "soul" of the writer. Those letters of this era that debated ethical and moral questions—always without formalized presentation—came to be called "letter-essays" (Doty 1973, 8, 15).[3]

Through the increased use of letter-essays Renaissance writers and readers gained awareness not only of the open interactive nature of letters, but also of a sense of audience that could be characterized such that "the mental relationship with the person in question is indivisible from the conscious process of writing" (Guillen 1986, 81–82). This sense of connection to a listener-reader also fostered stylistic devices overtly imitative of oral language or conversation. Such attempts to recapture the oral had not received approval by classical or Hellenistic writers who feared the intrusion of either mannerisms or extended and broken sentences. During the Renaissance, however, writers came to embrace the goal of exhibiting voice in narrative, adapting language to both addressee and subject. Letters of all types, including those directed to scientific topics, came to interrogate ideas for their relevance to daily existence and varying contexts. Networks of scientists wrote letters to keep the exchange of ideas current and enlivened through questioning and argument. When, in the late seventeenth century, royal academies and societies became established in Great Britain, the form of the scientific essay grew out of earlier letters of those correspondents who had used letters for debates, comparative observations, and reports on experiments (Pearl 1984, 108).

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, writers of other genres also began to take advantage of the literary value of the indiscretionary potential of letters—either when intercepted or preserved beyond writer and originally intended reader. Renaissance writers (especially those of Spain) noted the three-way nature of dialogue: that among the writer's inner voices, that between the writer and assumed reader, and that between the written text and unintended audiences (including even those readers of other literary texts into which letters might find their way).[4] The uncertainty about whether one's letters would remain inclusive only of writer and intended single reader made such writings trilogic, with the third party a potentially prying observer unknown to either member of the original communicative pair.

> The equivocal triangle, the latent voyeurism . . .—the only innocent participant being the original addressee of the letter—exists or increases in the exact degree in which the moral or newsworthy epistle becomes so familiar and private as to be lacking apparently in general interest and only be of concern to immediate friends and near relatives. What was intended to be read, in principle, is actually reread; and, most important, reread by others. Literary letter reading has to be the rereading of curious minds. *Hence the proximity, when intimacy is shared, not of dialogue but of autobiography and of the forerunners of the essay.* (Guillen 1986, 100–101; my italics)

Among the growing literate class of the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, letters and journals (often described as letters to the self though written with a keen sense of an audience) came increasingly to be public forms.

The intertwined trail of inner individual experience, conversation, letter, long narrative, essay, and literary letter reading received comment repeatedly from editors of collections of letters (either commonplace books or practical manuals for letter writing) and later also from both writers and editors of essay collections. Early letters were dictated or *indited*; even educated writers dictated their letters to a professional scribe and thus the literal voice figured largely in the construction of these forms.[5]

English letter writing evolved into epistolary novels, academic and scientific articles, and letters of highly institutionalized form to accomplish particular speech acts (such as requesting, pleading, and accusing—used in trials). Manuals for letter writing—and the continuing spread of literacy—made it possible for individuals to write their own letters. This evolution of a sense of voice led to "a talking mode (shall we say?) of writing, as natural, almost as easy as speech itself; one that was bound to settle itself at length, and take on a propitious fashion of its own" (Rhys and Vaughan 1913, viii). This talking mode from letter to essay depended on "self-revelation"—the clear indication of the writer as "a self worthy to be spoken of, and a self capable of real speech" (Gass 1985, 25)—in response to the "irritation of the idea" (Dawson and Dawson 1908, 9, 12) needling at the soul and mind of the writer.

The Essay and Conversation

These features of both the context and the text of letters bear close resemblance to those outlined by Michel de Montaigne, the French writer usually credited with establishing the essay as a literary form in the late 1500s. Those who trace the modern history of the essay—whether in English or another language—inevitably point to Montaigne and to the fact that those who brought the essay to English did so with full awareness of his views regarding both text and context: leisurely, serene, and comfortable surroundings should bring forth essays that needed intimate readers willing to inquire into diverse and diverting topics. But such inquiries must be based on reflective observations, contemplated in leisure, and shared as though the audience were friends and relatives.

Though English essayists from Sir Francis Bacon forward contributed their own features to lists of attributes of the essay, all seemed to hold the view that both the letter and the essay said much about both writer and context. Bacon, though far more philosophical in his essay topics than Montaigne had been, also endorsed the conditions that his French predecessor had laid out: "To write just treatises requireth leisure in the writer and leisure in the reader . . ." (1612 preface, n. p.). Bacon called his essays "brief notes" and developed an aphoristic style, aristocratic

in its assertive intelligent force. He also added philosophical essays that focused the reader more on the ideas of the writing than on the character and personality of the writer. But throughout the seventeenth century lesser-known English writers continued to help promote the popularity of the personal essay and to sustain the letter-essay responding to curiosity about ideas and depending on keen observations of both the self and the surrounding environment. The casual air that Montaigne had given the essay ensured that personal or familiar essays remained dominant, though they were supplemented occasionally by philosophical and critical essays.

In Great Britain in the eighteenth century, the rise of journalism, and with it the rise of the periodical essay, put essays in the hands and on the lips of the reading public. Richard Steele published the *Tatler*, and later he and Joseph Addison established the *Spectator*. Essays in these works resembled modern editorials and treated topics ranging from the personal to the philosophical and scientific; social and political phenomena were favorite subjects. Addison's essays were often extended letters; Alexander Pope reestablished the letter as a prominent public form when he felt the essay had become too homilectic for his taste (Dawson and Dawson 1908, 10–11). The primary writers for the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, and writers such as John Dryden, Daniel Defoe, and Samuel Johnson, helped establish the essay in prefaces to literary works, as commentary on other literary forms, and as travel pieces. The essay and the written forms in which it appeared benefited from literary influences that came not only from the rise of journalism, but also from the growing influence in England of the coffeehouse, a center for conversation and newspaper reading.

Here the habit of moving from periodical essay to direct conversation and debate about the topics discussed in pamphlets and periodicals installed some of the most prominent "oral" features of the essay. The first issue of the *Tatler* (run on 12 April 1709) made clear the connections between the periodical and the coffeehouse and the desire to achieve directness and simplicity and to cover a wide range of topics. The *Spectator* created the famous "Spectator Club" and gave greater attention to learning than had the *Tatler*, but remained clear in its dependence on being a major source for lively conversation not only at coffeehouses and tea-tables, but also at assemblies and clubs. Those who took part in the spread of the essay through these early periodicals and the clubs upon which they depended characterized the essay as thoughts written down simply as they occurred, without the need to make the method or aim of thinking evident. Samuel Johnson, whose essays played an important role in periodicals of the late eighteenth century, defined the essay as "a loose sally of the mind; an irregular undigested piece; not a regular and orderly performance."

The spread of newspapers in the nineteenth century ensured a reading public for essays, especially personal and critical essays. In Great Britain Charles Lamb followed Montaigne in centering the essay in his personality and in adding "whimsical," "familiar," and "intimate" to terms describing types of essays. Lamb characterized the essay as the form best suited to fragments and scattered pieces of truth, to hints and glimpses, and even to half-intuitions, semiconsciousnesses, partial illuminations, and dim instincts. William Hazlitt, on the other hand, used the essay primarily as an instrument of criticism, especially on literary topics. Matthew Arnold added political and historical essays.

The American Scene

Within the United States, Benjamin Franklin, instrumental in the establishment of periodicals and learned societies in the eighteenth century, used the essay form to encapsulate practical playful wisdom, primarily in *Poor Richard's Almanac*, published from 1733 for many years. These essays are playful in their wisdom. But Franklin also helped establish the American Philosophical Society, a center for debate and serious conversation about essays received from abroad on scientific, political, and linguistic topics. By the late eighteenth century, American periodicals both reprinted many political essays from European and British sources and provided their own. John de Crevecoeur, Thomas Paine, John Dickinson, Charles Brockden Brown, and Joseph Dennie wrote for a variety of American newspapers. Meanwhile, American statesmen, such as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton, created an interest in the political essay, discussing various national issues and analyzing the role of particular documents such as the Constitution.

Literary figures, such as Washington Irving, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau, linked their letters and journals to essay writing in the early nineteenth century. They used their journals as reminders to themselves to return to thoughts worth pursuing. Irving's *Sketch Book* paralleled in many ways Addison's *Spectator*. Emerson, in particular, used his journal to record his changing views on the essay, and its relation to other forms written and oral, such as the sermon, the lecture, and conversation. He saw a fundamental contradiction between the desire for "the natural" in writing and the recognition that to create such writing the artist must strive to work it to a state of perfection. Conversation, sometimes for Emerson but most often for other transcendentalists such as Bronson Alcott and Margaret Fuller, seemed the closest oral language form to natural perfection, and yet, transferred to the page, it fell far short of expectations. Thus written forms emulating conversation had to incorporate the best features of talk while honing these into a form appropriate for written texts.[6]

In his essay on Montaigne Emerson indicates the extent to which he viewed conversation as a model for written work. He wanted a written form that would admit all topics and a wide variety of genres: "[P]hilosophy, ethics, divinity, criticism, poetry, humor, fun, mimicry, anecdotes, jokes, ventriloquism. All the breadth & versatility of the most liberal conversation, highest lowest personal local topics, all are permitted, and all may be combined in one speech" (Gilman 1960–77, 7:224). In this July 1839 journal entry he speaks of his expectations for the lecture, a form he was soon to find disappointing and would replace with the essay. In the essay, Emerson found a way to provide personal communication—a revelation of himself debating and weighing serious intellectual topics with an openness that allowed others to enter the dialogue. Spaces for readers to enter came through the essayist's uses of suggestion, unexpected projection, and wit—all rendered in highly conversational subgenres of plain speech, such as aphorisms, anecdotes, and brief rhap-

sodic diversions (Buell 1973, 96–97). Such freedom meant for Emerson abandoning formal patterns or predictable order. As Atwan notes,

> To immerse ourselves in the essays [of Emerson] is to experience a constant shattering of rhetorical organization: definitions seem to alter or dissolve with the movement of syntax; systems of classification are outright ridiculed; logical transitions and connections are erased; examples, illustrations, and quotations sometimes undermine the points they are meant to support; chains of cause and effect are consistently interrupted. Emerson rarely narrates; seldom offers lengthy descriptions; almost never explains; does not care to build a tightly argued case for anything. (1986, 113)

It is important to note that Emerson's "shattering" of form received considerable attention only at the end of the nineteenth century (which coincided with a strong trend toward equating essays with rigidly formed and preplanned *school compositions*). He was then criticized both by British writers and by his American heirs (such as Henry James) for the formlessness of his essays. Numerous historians of the genre who have tried to explain why the form never flowered in the United States point to several puzzles. First, to follow in the tradition of Montaigne, the essay must be about the "naked self," the natural individual. Yet in a nation that has prided itself on individualism, a genre that celebrates individuals in conversation has never received the prominence of other genres. Second, though Montaigne, Lamb, Hazlitt, and Emerson were read by influential American thinkers and writers who applauded the essay form and could potentially have taken it up themselves, few chose the essay as their major literary presentation. Even "the dean of American essayists," E. B. White, complained that an essayist was a "second-class citizen" (1977, vii). Thus the major models of the form remained British well into the twentieth century, and Americans, while setting the form up as the preferred display of knowledge in educational institutions and persuasion in periodicals, never themselves opted to contribute substantially to the model. Those American writers who devoted themselves primarily to writing essays tended to rely on specific vehicles of journalism, and thus their rise and fall often paralleled that of the periodicals or editors with whom they associated themselves.[7]

The essay in the United States evolved with and through familiar letters and personal journals into a wide variety of styles and shapes as institutions (such as newspapers and periodicals) and contexts (for example, travel, political debates) provided outlets and fashionable topics. By the end of the nineteenth century, numerous commentators lamented the passing of conversation, the essay's major oral support. Altered work patterns and varying expectations for the use of leisure time pushed conversation aside in favor of discussions, debates, and other more singularly purposeful oral forms.[8]

The Essay and Pedagogical Display

During the second half of the nineteenth century, when schooling in both England and the United States began to depend almost exclusively on learners displaying their knowledge in written form, the essay emerged as the preferred genre of educational institutions. Along with the move from oral performance in active, informed conversational debate as the major mark of learning, came a shift from a reliance on direct sensory experience to a reliance on the written words of authorities: "[T]he interpretation rather than the bare observation of the universe seems the most essential thing in education," declared a 1908 critic of British education (quoted in Binn 1940, 168). Similarly, a British educator who visited the United States several times at the turn of the century noted the growth there "of the authority of methodical and specially instructed thought on social and political questions, as against average unspecialized opinion" (Wallas 1914, 175). Agnes Repplier, perhaps the most prominent essayist of the early twentieth century, noted with regret that the educator's hand had come to "lay heavy on schoolroom and nursery" (1908, 156). Since essays and conversations had centered for several centuries on topics in the political and social (including literary) realms, the replacement of opinion with specialized and methodical authority brought increasing attempts both to regiment the form and to replace the conversational or back-and-forth quality of the essay with the assertion of individual authority. Along with these changes in the United States came the march toward standardization of curricula and tests and bureaucratization of decision making that helped install this new "essay" form as the mark of "clear thinking" and "good writing" in schools.

But, curiously enough, these shifts of context and of form did not go unnoticed by compilers of texts of essays that could help teachers understand how they might lead their students to "clear, concise" writing of essays. These editors often acknowledged the contexts that had generated the models—leisure richly textured by human relationships and books as friendly sources of knowledge—and noted that the classroom promised little of either of these conditions. Instead, classrooms had become public places in which one could find individuals writing in silence to display their passive acceptance of books as authorities. These compilers of textbooks of essays admitted their insecurity about attempting to squeeze the essay not only into an unfriendly setting, but also into a form firmly fixed through a simple list of generic conventions.

Thus prefaces to these collections of essays echo many ideas about the essay expressed through the centuries by the writers whose essays were collected in textbooks for classroom use. No doubt, the close study of essays necessary before compiling and editing volumes for use in secondary schools or colleges resulted in the compilers' understanding of the essay's resistance to the usual types of conventions that characterized lyric poetry, tragedy, or comedy. Moreover, they had to be aware of the essay's close ties to leisurely conversation fed by observation and reading. However, these understandings of the essay did not reach school-board members, curriculum designers, teacher educators, and teachers, who forced the form for knowledge display. Collections of essays and the occasional single book on the form written for use in schools repeatedly set out reasons why the essay did not adhere to the expected format of a genre with conventions and components of predictability.[9]

Features of the essay that received the most frequent attention by compilers and editors highlight its dependence on a thinking writer, willing to let ideas flow, and to base ideas on observations. These observations relate not only to the world be-

That the form offers no ready order or listing of components does not mean that it can result from a careless approach. A striking puzzle and one that receives notice with great frequency, especially after 1920, is that which also concerned Emerson: the apparent ease and even carelessness with which essays seem to be offered, while they are in reality carefully executed. Many who commented on the essay note an idea similar to the following point made by a compiler of a 1930 collection of essays: "The essay at its best . . . is marked by the appearance, but not the reality, of carelessness and ease" (Robertson 1930, 4). Writers must give attention to crafting the order of sentences, refining their shape, and cutting away repetitious portions (one compiler recommended to novice essayists: "The true worth of your first essay is going to depend very largely on what you cut out of it" [Johnson 1932, 41]). The essay's brevity and informality seemingly erupt from a clarity of vision and a stored simplicity of summative wit of a vibrant personality ideally pictured in the richest of webs connecting ready and intimate conversationalists and books and their readers.

Here, then, is the paradox that draws essays closest to conversation. The success of both depends on attentiveness to the voices in the head, to the potential listeners and audience, with a follow-up in the writing that indicates that these voices have been listened to. These signals come, however, as a result of its "polished form" and "*artful* disorder"; some have described it "as near an approach to simultaneity as the nature of literary art will allow." Those qualities of ease, naturalness, and flow—based on close observations of conversationalists and attention to voices in the head—depend, however, on the expertise and practice gained through taking advantage of such experiences in leisure time. The greater the available time for conversation with others, self-reflection, and rereadings, the greater the evidence of polish and art.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, the essay as the form through which students should display their ability to write was well established. But reconciliation between this use of the essay and the reading of the essay as a literary form did not come easily. The editors of essay collections for high school and college students addressed this issue repeatedly and with agreement that they and their students faced three dilemmas. First, the essay form demanded "more maturity in taste" than other forms, such as the novel or the short story (Chamberlain 1926, xiii). Second, the essay, while treating everyday subjects and the familiar, also treated life's complexities, and thus its interpretation often depended on a depth of knowledge and experience with the expression of beliefs, doubts, whims, and so on, that young people were not likely to have. Third, essays had their origins in the ordinary language of letters and conversations and in their expressions of the personality of the writer, and yet they gave their pleasure most directly through their unexpected ways of using language. Young people were highly unlikely to be sufficiently attuned to the nuances of language, generally acknowledged to come through immersion in literature, to be able to reconcile this delicate balance between the use of everyday language and the use of carefully crafted "talk-writing."

In addition, essays had to be written with some degree of consciousness about the making of ideas in the mind of the individual: "[T]he essay as it has gone on has not lost by being a little self-conscious of its function . . ." (Rhys and Vaughan

ity with literary texts, and frequent talk with others so experienced, was unlikely to be characteristic of young writers, especially those in public schools now committed to mass education. The metaknowledge of both language and of self as maker of meaning had to come from what the essayist E. B. White once described as the "self-liberated man, sustained by the childish belief that everything he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest. . . . Only a person who is congenitally self-centered has the effrontery and the stamina to write essays" (quoted in Pack and Perrini 1991, v). This kind of self-confidence, as well as an awareness of language as both self-expression and social expression, had, from Montaigne forward, been the "natural" product of the leisure of the higher social classes and of a cultural confidence engendered by power based on society's institutions of governance and finance. In the twentieth century, American classrooms and their students and teachers—at both the precollege and higher educational levels—came less and less to reflect such class and cultural characteristics. Moreover, the well-established bond of shared backgrounds between reader and writer could no longer be expected. Almost apologetically, those who wrote prefaces to textbooks of essays gave teachers and students advice such as this: "[I]n a true essay the writer assumes a degree of acquaintanceship with his reader, and a consequent willingness to reveal *himself*, . . . [A] thoughtfully written letter is likely to be as perfect an essay as one may accomplish. . . . I would urge the beginner who finds essay writing especially difficult to put his first attempts into the form of an open letter to an intimate friend" (Johnson 1932, 11).

Observers of essays and recommenders of pedagogical strategies for bringing new writers to the form with the right mindset repeatedly talked of possible ways to recreate the conditions for the essay in classrooms. They urged that reading and conversing precede the writing of the essay, for its essence was "talk on paper" that should carry the same pleasure as that to be derived from conversation—both with the self and with others "to please the self." Neither coercion nor conformity could nurture the essay.

By the middle of the twentieth century, most textbook compilers and those familiar with the historical evolution of the context and forms of the English essay simply stopped mentioning the contradictions between current goals for the essay in schools and the central trends of its development. Moreover, numerous observers of the patterns of leisure and habits of social interaction noted the decline of conversation, the oral prototype of the essay.[10]

Modern Literary Theory and Conversation

Since the Anglo-American discovery near the end of the twentieth century of Mikhail Bakhtin and acknowledgment of his contributions to an "anthropology of literature," the genre of primary focus in discussions of the dialogic quality of literature has been the novel. Considerable attention has been devoted to the role of conversation in the novel and to Bakhtin's observations about speech genres, including conversation. Certain ironies exist in the considerable attention given to this work, however. The first is the failure to take up the recommendations of Bakhtin for an

"anthropology of literature" and to attend to the actual reports of contexts, definition, and forms of both producers and consumers of literature. The second is the failure to link Bakhtin's ideas with those of linguists, especially those of the Prague school (whose work was, so far as we know, unknown to Bakhtin[11]) and discourse analysts, who have detailed "the living utterance" and its transfer to, as well as transformations in, literature.

The history of the essay illustrates the extent to which ordinary speakers, readers, and writers have noted many of its features that literary theorists appear to believe are unique to their field. The brief overview given here of what essayists have said about letters, conversations, and essays demonstrates a strong similarity to points made by Bakhtin and other literary theorists about speech genres and their uses in written forms, as well as the dialogic nature of literature. Bakhtin noted the importance in Cicero's day, as public life increased for a greater portion of people, of genres that allowed the expression of private life and thoughts. Conversation and the familiar letter offered an "intimate and familiar atmosphere (one that was, of course, semiconventionalized), a new private sense of self, suited to the drawing room" (1981, 143).

In his insistence upon considering speech genres in their contexts, Bakhtin also noted the difficulty of having society force an authoritative voice onto literature. He argued that authoritative discourse could not be represented (interpreted), but instead could only be transmitted. Without a receptive climate of interaction, such transmission removed the discourse from "zones of contact"—of presumed relations between text and listener-reader. His description of authoritative discourse parallels that of compilers of essays who argued the impossibility of the essay's reception and production under formal education's reshaping of it as an authoritative fixed form: "Its inertia, its semantic finiteness and calcification, the degree to which it is hard-edged, a thing in its own right, the impermissibility of any free stylistic development in relation to it—all this renders the artistic representation of authoritative discourse impossible" (1981, 344). Bakhtin further warned that internally persuasive discourses must be tightly interwoven with "one's own word," which was in turn "wrought out of others' works that have been acknowledged and assimilated . . ." (1981, 345). That discourse cannot stand apart from the social situation that engendered it or the expectation of response reverberates through the writings of both Bakhtin and Voloshinov as well as those of members of the Prague school. The dialogic depends not only on the current context of generation but also on the anticipated situation of application. The dialogic is therefore "most apparent when we have to take some decision. We hesitate. We do not know what is the best course of action. We argue with ourselves, we try to convince ourselves of the rightness of one decision. Our consciousness seems to be divided into two independent and contradictory voices" (Voloshinov 1983, 119). Language's active relation to potential action, such as that which often lies not far below the surface in social and political discourse, impels the dialogic form.

In summary, these links of the essay to social context and expectation, as well as to forms such as the letter and conversation that share similar situational features, have persisted since Montaigne. Major essayists in English have never lost sight of the fact that, like conversations, essays are open-ended in their paths of development. Their major constraint is length; they, like conversations, do not lack for appropriate topics; they take up vast and significant topics in the barest of treatments; and they express the personality, opinions, and beliefs of the writer-talker. Similarly, both essayists and conversationalists exhibit strong tendencies to generalize, to take only a few of numerous possible vantage points, and to leave open any possibility of absolute closure on a topic. Both essays and conversations may toss a topic into the ring for discussion and then walk around the topic, ramble, and digress to unrelated matters. Neither essays nor conversations must have highly specific purposes or goals; they happen, more often than not, for the pleasure of speaker-writer and listener-reader and expect the latter to carry away memorable quotations. Both depend heavily on leisure time, and the separation of the activity of reading or conversing from distracting labor.

Americans, in particular, have struggled with their definitions and exhortations for conversation. Through the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, writers of every sort extolled the virtues of conversation and tried to delineate its major features. On one point, commentators on conversation agreed: in every community, it was then the most common form of intellectual activity. Its highly interactive nature made it something of a contest and called for agility, alertness, and sensitivity; at the same time it demanded mental acumen, wit, and adherence to certain social conventions.

In both Great Britain and the United States, major writers of the essay also received considerable praise for their conversational powers. Within the United States, periodical writers often pointed out that Samuel Johnson's conversational skills displayed even more of the powers of his mind than did his most-celebrated written performances. Similarly, Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott received acclaim as conversationalists as well as writers. Most recommenders of conversation agreed that those who would succeed in conversation must do so through keen attention to the world about them, and persistence in observing and mentally recording (or jotting down) their observations.

But by the late nineteenth century and consistently through the twentieth century, both essayists and editors of essay collections tried to link essay and conversation and often seemed to put forth their collections with an air of resignation that the presumed pedagogical and literary objectives for the essay were unlikely to be achieved in the classroom. Leisure, opportunity to practice conversation with close associates, and time for reflective reading were the prerequisites for success in the essay; both thoughts "in the head" and in conversation had to leak through into essays. In turn, essays had to be read against and with conversation. They had to be written after adequate time for observation and listening. These qualities—plus those of honing thoughts into witty language—came most readily through conversation, the prototypical form to sustain an active relationship between speaker-writer and listeners-readers and also among the various voices *within* the speaker-writer. As Bakhtin reminds us, in this latter polyphonic condition, writers work through an internalized dialogue or conversation in which they change course through the shifts of voices.

Such shifts may be of different durations, so that, for an extended period within an essay, the writer may assume a monologic stance that prevails over audienced voices. In other words, though seemingly monologic, certain portions of essays reveal the internal dialogue, or the play of ideas in the mind of the writer. Some essayists use different registers or styles to reflect such internalized roles and voices—sometimes making a point in elevated speech and then undercutting it by colloquial objection or counterpoint. Similarly, the intellectual, tightly reasoned point may be paralleled by the emotional argument or plea.[12]

Several members of the Prague school, in their quest to develop a theory of poetics and to differentiate "poetic" language from "workaday technical" language debated the nature of dialogue, placing considerable emphasis on the "natural" human tendency to establish a "tension" between the "I" and "you" of dialogue and arguing that both internal and external dialogues held such tensions. Those most informal or open would include "every dialogue without direct and immediate usefulness in which one talks primarily in order to talk, for pleasure, for play, out of politeness. This definition excludes from our concern both judicial inquiries and diplomatic or commercial negotiations, councils and even scholarly conferences even though they abound in superfluous talk" (Tarde, cited in Mukarovsky, 109). This focus on the "self-oriented" nature of conversation highlights the self-conscious ways in which both conversationalists and essayists *play* with language, often displaying a sense of "polite" admission of other voices: "The interrelation of the participants in a dialogue is therefore felt as a tension not bound to either of the two speaking persons but actually existing 'between' them; it is thus objectified as the 'psychological situation' of the dialogue" (Mukarovsky 1977, 86).

The range and frequency of such internal and external shifts will depend, of course, on circumstances. Just as an oral dialogue among several participants may be bound by spatial and ritual design (as in a doctoral examination, for example), so the internal dialogue of some essays may be much more confined to a particular theme and not as subject to extraneous thoughts or "side voices." The marking of these side voices makes clear the need to sustain the semantic unity of dialogic discourse—even that of the essay—which reveals the dialogic of the writer's voices and the active participation of the reader(s)' with the writer(s)' voices. The theme or subject of the essay that gives it semantic unity provides the boundedness of the essay. Voices that may seem to be contradictory or sharply divergent mark the transition of individual replies. Semantic reversals, changes of key (to irony, for example), or shifts of tempo, or devices that set up I-you oppositions (or within political essays, we-they polarities) may be marked by attribution through personal pronouns of the first and second or third persons, but more often this tension is revealed by other means. These include affirmation/negation, and the use of adversatives (*however, but, nevertheless*, and so on) and concessives (*despite, even if*, and the like).

These and other means demarcate the speaking-thinking subjects in dialogue and stress the working out of diverse paths to and through themes. Varying opinions, facts, interpretations, contexts, volitions, and intentions shape approaches to topics. Similarly, the spatial or intellectual closeness or distance of the speaker to a topic may mark the voices of dialogue—internal and external.

The usual deictic markers of space and time, as well as tense markers, also carry these distinctions.

The Future of the Essay

To call attention to the fact that both essayists and collectors of essays have long described the dialogic nature of the essay, as well as its interdependence with the letter and conversation, should not diminish the fact that some literary theorists have similarly characterized the form. Though several European theorists address the dialogic nature of the form and bring epistemology and social theory to their observations on the form, T. W. Adorno (1984) particularly acknowledges its possibly inevitable incompatibility with societal conditions of the late twentieth century.[13]

Adorno's comments take us back to where we began, with the lament of the anonymous nineteenth-century American observer of the canons of conversation. Adorno reminds us that the essay cuts through the self-preservative semblance of hierarchical ordering of thought transformed into visible language. He notes that the essay form undercuts current academic reifications of well-ordered and consistently reasoned discourse based on Cartesian principles. Adorno describes the essay in numerous ways that indicate its defiance of tradition, of hierarchy, of fixed form. In a personification of the essay form itself—that appears to take agency away from the writer and to place it in the very genre produced—Adorno notes that the essay simultaneously suspends the traditional concept of method: the essay "denies any primeval givens," "refuses any definition of its concepts," "takes the antisystematic impulse into its own procedure," and introduces concepts directly, "immediately," as it receives them (1984, 159–60).

Adorno notes the fetishizing of language that comes through academics' demand for strict and precise use of terms and fixed definitions. He tells us that within essays, this precision of both meaning and method must slip away because the essay "urges the reciprocal interaction of its concepts in the process of intellectual experience" (160). The essay defies Descartes's rules to establish certainty and refinement in method and presentation, for it neither urges the decomposition of objects or ideas into their parts, nor proceeds from the simplest to the most complex, nor attempts to be comprehensive. It is brief, moves in response to the irritation of an idea, has a mosaiclike connection to other essays, and usually shakes off any illusion that the world is simple and its forces clear-cut. In short,

> The essay is both more open and more closed than traditional thought would like. It is more open insofar as, through its inner nature, it negates anything systematic, and satisfies itself all the better the more strictly it excludes the systematic. . . . On the other hand, the essay is more closed in that it labors emphatically on the form of its presentation. (Adorno 1984, 165)

As a commentator on Adorno's essays has noted, "the more antagonistic and opaque society becomes, the more the attempt to name it [the essay] will incline the essay towards metabasis" (Hullot-Kentor 1984, 150).

Yet Adorno writes optimistically that current efforts both to fix the form and to theorize about its shapes and shapings will not erase its essential dialogic nature.

He notes the hour now "more unfavorable than ever" for the essay, as societal trends and academic rules provide no fertile ground for the types of human relationships and ways of knowing upon which the essay has traditionally depended. But he remains hopeful that its very defiance of convention and hierarchy—inextricably bound into its very being—will prevail over all efforts to redefine it away from its conversational and epistolary roots and connections. Thus the "obviousness" and application to "everyday scenes of human existence" may in the end be reason enough for securing its continuation.

Notes

1. In "The Problem of Speech Genres" (reprinted in 1986), Bakhtin includes the "genres of salon conversations" as well as those of "table conversation, intimate conversations among friends, intimate conversations within the family, and so on" among those genres subject to "free creative reformulation" (80). He goes on to address the importance of context—atmosphere and social relations—that supports the structures and expressive reception of such talk. Both readers and writers assimilate these genres and their contexts and carry them into their interpretations and creations of utterances. Several of the members of the Linguistic Circle of Prague address similar issues with regard to the language of the salon and the extensive power of conversational language there (see especially G. Tarde in Mukarovsky [1977]).

2. Since the 1920s the "five-paragraph essay" has been the best example of formal education's redefinition of the essay into a highly conventionalized purpose and format that has nothing in common with the literary genre. The "college essay" has become a repeated routine for students in English and social studies classes, a critical part of college applications and entrance examinations, and the staple of freshman English courses. Though commonly equated, the *essay* and the *article* have little in common; while the essay has many features found in the friendly informal letter and has the appearance of openness and spontaneity, the article is more consciously shaped, thorough, and final. While the essay is closely akin to conversation, the article has an affinity with discussion that must "set the problem in its significant terms" and "must end in agreement" (Bourne 1924, 6). The editors of *The Bread Loaf Anthology of Contemporary American Essays* caution: "An essay is *not* an article; it is not a thorough, scholarly treatment of an isolated subject. By definition it is an exploration, a journey out that frequently becomes, in the best examples, an inward journey too, a picking at the thread which finally unravels the garment of the writer's particular concern and scrutiny" (Pack and Parini 1991, v). Essayist William H. Gass characterizes the essay as "obviously the opposite of that awful object, 'the article' . . . [which must] appear complete and straightforward and footnoted and useful and certain . . ." (1985, 25).

3. Sir Francis Bacon, in the "Dedicatory Epistle" to the first book published in English that used the term *essay*, his *Essays or Counsells, Civill and Morall* (first published in 1597 and again in 1612 and 1625), tells his readers of the historic link of letters to essays. Of *essay*, Bacon writes "The word is late, but the thing is ancient; for Seneca's Epistles to Lucilius, if you mark them well, are but essays, that is, dispersed meditations, though conveyed in the form of epistles" (1612 edition, n.p.).

4. Throughout the history of the Christian church, letters, such as the Epistles of St. Paul, were written to be read aloud to churches consisting of individuals not directly known to the author.

5. This observation appears frequently in collections of letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For example, Braumuller, editor of a facsimile edition of a Folger manuscript letter book of the seventeenth century, notes that "the form that was soon to be recognized as the essay owes a great deal to the letter" (1983, 10). A collector of "great English letter writers" notes, "[A]mong the earliest letter-writers of English literature the distinction between the essay and the letter was not very carefully preserved" (Dawson and Dawson 1908, 12). Though it is impossible to identify precise features of similarity that drew such notices, it is useful to note that writers often observed that letters and essays held certain acts or ways of thinking out as their desired outcomes. Samuel Richardson, in a collection of "familiar letters" he edited before he published his novel *Clarissa*, noted the extent to which letters had become public rather than private, and that letters both demonstrated ways of thinking and also illustrated particular types of acts (excusing, chiding, requesting, and so on) accomplished through these written forms of language (1974, xvi, xxvii). For a discussion of modern epistolary essays, see Hermann (1986) on those of Virginia Woolf.

6. The most comprehensive account of the links between conversation and essays for transcendentalist writers is Buell (1973), but see also Deese (1988) for the views of key figures on the difficulties of transferring conversation to the page.

7. The writings of Americans debating why Americans have never excelled in the essay form are abundant and include not only those who have tried to make their reputation through the form (for example, E. B. White), but also literary critics such as Alfred Kazin. When in 1986 the publishing company Ticknor and Fields began producing an annual volume called *The Best American Essays*, Robert Atwan, the editor of the series and a devotee of the essay, ironically based the expectation of success for the venture on the very versatility in coverage and sources that pieces of writing called essays had achieved by the end of the twentieth century (Hardwick 1986). Atwan acknowledged the essay's slippery definition and wide-ranging publication outlets and admitted that any essay was likely to be short lived in acceptance or popularity because essayists' topics were often of only passing interest and also highly dependent on knowledge of specific societal contexts. Two collections of scholarly studies of the essay (Butrym 1989; Good 1988) take up many of these same issues, and several authors continue the debate about the place of the essay in the literary history of the United States.

8. See, for example, several essays by Agnes Repplier (1908), prominent essayist of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for an overview of the shifting contexts and evaluations of conversation in American life; also see Heath 1990.

9. This summary is based on a review of over 1,500 collections of essays published for use in secondary schools and colleges in the United States between 1800 and 1950. The bulk of materials for the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were consulted in the Library of Congress and the Library of the American Antiquarian Society. Those from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were drawn from the libraries of Teachers College at Columbia University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, the University of North Carolina, the University of Michigan, and the John A. Nietz Textbook Collection of the University of Pittsburgh. Single words or phrases that occur repeatedly in essay collections across the decades will be used here without bibliographic reference; complete citations will be given only for longer quotations.

10. It is curious to note that though by the late twentieth century many educational reformers promoted collaboration, "whole language," and the role of oral language in academic learning, few called attention to the ways in which these conditions might either lead educators to give up their long-held faith in the essay as the favored academic genre

or to acknowledge that only massive redefinitions of schooling could re-create earlier favorable conditions for essay writing; see Willinsky (1990) for an overview of these issues.

11. In an article that traces the influence of Mikhail Bakhtin on the Prague Linguistic Circle and the impact of Prague-school theory on Nicholai Bakhtin (brother of Mikhail), Galan (1987) argues that Mikhail Bakhtin remained unaware of the Prague school. Galan also posits that Bakhtin's work appeared in Prague only as being by Voloshinov.

12. Though all essayists shift voices, internal and external, in their writing, some make the turn-taking of alternative points of view more obvious than others. Virginia Woolf, always both playful and polite, indicates her shifts by phrases such as "On the other side, of course . . . ," "And yet . . . ," "How, we are made to wonder . . . ," and "But the gossip says . . ." To present views opposing her own, Woolf often created unknown characters whose nature becomes obvious through the voice she gives them: "At this very moment some Lady Bertram finds it almost too trying . . ." (Woolf 1984, 227). Some of her most playful and polite language comes in those essays highly critical of other literary critics; see, for example "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," a sharp rebuttal to an essay that critic Arnold Bennett had written on the topic of character in fiction. The essayist William H. Gass makes his turn-taking among different voices most evident in the opening pages of his essay "Emerson and the Essay" (1985).

13. Several studies of European speculative essayists portray their self-consciousness about the form and their awareness of its insistence on plural voices; see especially Kauffmann (1981), Beaujour (1981), and Bensmaia (1987).

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