

Collected Essays, Aldous Huxley - Preface

"I am a man and alive," wrote D. H. Lawrence. "For this reason I am a novelist. And, being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive, but never get the whole hog... Only in the novel are *all* things given full play."

What is true of the novel is only a little less true of the essay. For, like the novel, the essay is a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything. By tradition, almost by definition, the essay is a short piece, and it is therefore impossible to give all things full play within the limits of a single essay. But a collection of essays can cover almost as much ground, and cover it almost as thoroughly as can a long novel. Montaigne's Third Book is the equivalent, very nearly, of a good slice of the *Comedie Humaine*.

Essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference. There is the pole of the personal and the autobiographical; there is the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and there is the pole of the abstract-universal. Most essayists are at home and at their best in the neighborhood of only one of the essay's three poles, or at the most only in the neighborhood of two of them. There are the predominantly personal essayists, who write fragments of reflective autobiography and who look at the world through the keyhole of anecdote and description. There are the predominantly objective essayists who do not speak directly of themselves, but turn their attention outward to some literary or scientific or political theme. Their art consists in setting forth, passing judgment upon, and drawing general conclusions from, the relevant data. In a third group we find those essayists who do their work in the world of high abstractions, who never condescend to be personal and who hardly deign to take notice of the particular facts, from which their generalizations were originally drawn. Each kind of essay has its special merits and defects. The personal essayists may be as good as Charles Lamb at his best, or as bad as Mr. X at his cutest and most self-consciously whimsical. The objective essay may be as lively, as brassily contentious as a piece by Macaulay; but it may also, with fatal ease, degenerate into something merely informative or, if it be critical, into something merely learned and academic. And how splendid, how truly oracular are the utterances of the great generalizes! "He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief." And from Bacon we pass to Emerson. "All men plume themselves on the improvement of society, and no man improves. Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other. For everything that is given, something is taken." Even a Baltasar Gracian, that briefest of essayists who writes as though he were cabling his wisdom, at two dollars a word, to the Antipodes, sometimes achieves a certain magnificence. "Things have their period; even excellences are subject to fashion. The sage has one advantage: he is immortal. If *this* is not his century, many others will be." But the medal of solemn and lapidary generalization has its reverse. The constantly abstract, constantly impersonal essayist is apt to give us not oracles but algebra. As an example of such algebraic writing, let me quote a short passage from the English translation of Paul Valery's *Dialogues*. It is worth

remarking that French literature has a tradition of high and sustained abstraction; English literature has not. Works that in French are not at all out of the common seem, when translated, strange almost to the point of absurdity. But even when made acceptable by tradition and a great talent, the algebraic style strikes us as being very remote from the living reality of our immediate experience. Here, in the words of an imaginary Socrates, is Valéry's description of the kind of language in which (as I think, unfortunately) he liked to write. "What is more mysterious than clarity? What more capricious than the way in which light and shade are distributed over the hours and over men? Certain peoples lose themselves in their thoughts, but for the Greeks all things are forms. We retain only their relations and, enclosed, as it were, in the limpid day, Orpheus like we build, by means of the word, temples of wisdom and science that may suffice for all reasonable creatures. This great art requires of us an admirably exact language. The very word that signifies language is also the name, with us, for reason and calculation; the same word says these three things." In the stratosphere of abstract notions this elegant algebra is all very well; but a completely bodiless language can never do justice to the data of immediate experience, nor can it contribute anything to our understanding of the "capricious lights and shades" in the midst of which, whether we like it or not, we must perforce live out our lives.

The most richly satisfying essays are those which make the best not of one, not of two, but of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist. Freely, effortlessly, thought and feeling move in these consummate works of art, hither and thither between the essay's three poles—from the personal to the universal, from the abstract back to the concrete, from the objective datum to the inner experience.

The perfection of any artistic form is rarely achieved by its first inventor. To this rule Montaigne is the great and marvelous exception. By the time he had written his way into the Third Book, he had reached the limits of his newly discovered art. "What are these essays," he had asked at the beginning of his career, "but grotesque bodies pieced together of different members, without any definite shape, without any order, coherence, or proportion, except they be accidental." But a few years later the patchwork grotesques had turned into living organisms, into multiform hybrids like those beautiful monsters of the old mythologies, the mermaids, the man-headed bulls with wings, the centaurs, the Anubises, the seraphim—impossibilities compounded of incompatibles, but compounded from within, by a process akin to growth, so that the human trunk seems to spring quite naturally from between the horse's shoulders, the fish modulates into the full-breasted Siren as easily and inevitably as a musical theme modulates from one key to another. Free association artistically controlled—this is the paradoxical secret of Montaigne's best essays. One damned thing after another—but in a sequence that in some almost miraculous way develops a central theme and relates it to the rest of human experience. And how beautifully Montaigne combines the generalization with the anecdote, the homily with the autobiographical reminiscence! How skilfully he makes use of the concrete particular, the *chose vue*, to express some universal truth, and to express it more powerfully and penetratingly than it can be expressed by even the most oracular of the dealers in generalities! Here, for example, is what a great oracle, Dr. Johnson, has to say about the human situation and the uses of adversity. "Affliction is inseparable from our

present state; it adheres to all the inhabitants of this world, in different proportions indeed, but with an allotment which seems very little regulated by our own conduct. It has been the boast of some swelling moralists that every man's fortune was in his own power, that prudence supplied the place of all other divinities, and that happiness is the unfailing consequence of virtue. But, surely, the quiver of Omnipotence is stored with arrows, against which the shield of human virtue, however adamantine it has been boasted, is held up in vain; we do not always suffer by our crimes, we are not always protected by our innocence... Nothing confers so much ability to resist the temptations that perpetually surround us, as an habitual consideration of the shortness of life, and the uncertainty of those pleasures that solicit our pursuit; and this consideration can be inculcated only by affliction." This is altogether admirable; but there are other and, I would say, better ways of approaching the subject. "*J'ay veu en mon temps cent artisans, cent laboureurs, plus sages et plus heureux que des Recteurs de l'Universite.*" (I have seen in my time hundreds of artisans and laborers, wiser and happier than university presidents.) Again, "Look at poor working people sitting on the ground with drooping heads after their day's toil. They know neither Aristotle nor Cato, neither example nor precept; and yet from them Nature draws effects of constancy and patience purer and more unconquerable than any of those we study so curiously in the schools." Add to one touch of nature one touch of irony, and you have a comment on life more profound, in spite of its casualness, its seeming levity, than the most eloquent rumblings of the oracles. "It is not our follies that make me laugh," says Montaigne, "it is our sapiences." And why should our sapiences provoke a wise man to laughter? Among other reasons, because the professional sages tend to express themselves in a language of highest abstraction and widest generality—a language that, for all its gnomonic solemnity is apt, in a tight corner, to reveal itself as ludicrously inappropriate to the facts of life as it is really and tragically lived.

In the course of the last forty years I have written essays of every size and shape and color. Essays almost as short as Gracian's and, on occasion, longer even than Macaulay's. Essays autobiographical. Essays about things seen and places visited. Essays in criticism of all kinds of works of art, literary, plastic, musical. Essays about philosophy and religion, some of them couched in abstract terms, others in the form of an anthology with comments, others again in which general ideas are approached through the concrete facts of history and biography. Essays, finally, in which, following Montaigne, I have tried to make the best of all the essay's three worlds, have tried to say everything at once in as near an approach to contrapuntal simultaneity as the nature of literary art will allow of.

Sometimes, it seems to me, I have succeeded fairly well in doing what, in one field or another, I had set out to do. Sometimes, alas, I know that I have not succeeded. But "please do not shoot the pianist; he is doing his best." Doing his best, *selon ses quelques doigts perclus*, to make his cottage upright say as much as the great orchestra of the novel, doing his best to "give all things full play." For the writer at least, and perhaps also for the reader, it is better to have tried and failed to achieve perfection than never to have tried at all.