

Annual Congress of the Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur

University Bordeaux 3

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Essay(s)

The annual congress of the SAES is to be held at Bordeaux University on the 8th, 9th and 10th of May 2009. The theme chosen to fuel our thought is that of the Essay. 'Essai' in French, evoking not only the literary genre, but the notion of trying, testing and endeavouring. How fitting indeed then that, here in the Gironde region of France, birthplace of essayist, Michel de Montaigne, where so much testing and tasting goes on in the region's wineries and so many tries are scored beneath lofty rugby posts, that this be the subject of our musings.

'Essay' comes from the Medieval French for a 'trial' or 'attempt', in turn from the Latin *exigere* 'to test', from *ex* 'out' and *agere* 'to weigh.' The notion is that of 'putting to the proof' or 'testing the mettle of', as evoked in the divergent English spelling *assay*. In French as in English then, the term is two-fold; on one hand the idea is of examining, assessing, balancing the given properties of an object or hypothesis, on the other of embarking on a specific activity for the first time, of striving towards an end the nature of which will only be determined as the process unfolds. In any event, possibility is of the essence, that unlucky bedfellow of failure, missed opportunities and conversions sent wide, as our friends on the rugby pitch would doubtless agree. This is the realm of uncertainty and hesitation, setting the essay poles apart from any notion of consummate mastery and completion.

The genre lies at the watershed between future (a goal, worked towards, achieved) and past (the principle, built with hypotheses and models) of which it is at best a draft or copy. The essay rarely comes alone, further proof if any were needed, of the form's dual inadequacy. Its minion status and multiplicity make of it the shamefaced reverse side of alpha or omega, striven for, but never equalled. Yet the history of literary genres and ideas reveals that, on the contrary, in the essay's very weakness, be it voiced as such or not, lies its strength. In modern terms, the essay undermines the values attached to the archetypal ideal, authority and progress and replaces them with flexibility, freedom and lawlessness.

In any case, such is the view commonly shared in France and on the continent. Can the same be said of England and the United States? It would seem that the English-speaking world defines the essay, both as a value and form, not only by default but also, and more keenly, as a building block of a particular sensibility and culture. What if essay writing were then an invention of the English-speaking world after all, rather than begotten by the French as the etymology and references to Montaigne provided in English dictionaries suggest? In this light, the essay ties the knot between aesthetics and anthropology and invites us to reflect on the actual existence, or the alluring fantasy, of cultural specificity as seen from here (amateurism, subjectivism, pragmatism, empiricism... in turn embodied in some shape or form in essays).

In the wake of the great Francis Bacon, who introduced the discursive essay to England, we might study the alliance between inductive logic (opposed to the deductive logic of earlier essay writing) and the essay as the privileged expression of empirical reasoning, from Locke to Hume. We might also examine the metamorphoses and varying success of the genre through the centuries. The discursive genre reached its apogee during the Enlightenment,

hand in hand with the incumbent notion of providence and progress (cf. Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man*). In the nineteenth century, the essay heralded the emergence of a new literary figure, the urbane intellectual who, in the name of his own talent, chose to explore an experimental genre, thus setting himself apart from contemporary doctrines and ideologies. The rise of the essay coincides with that of polygraphy, from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Bernard Shaw, and brings the stance of the thinker-cum-prophet into clearer view, whose desire it is to 'weigh up' and 'evaluate' (*exigere*) the world about him. This demonstration of subjectivity at the service of common sense and pragmatism is also part and parcel of the reforming rather than revolutionary Socialism which came to the forefront in England at this time, notably voiced in the *Fabian Essays in Socialism* of 1889.

Further food for thought is sure to be uncovered in a study of societies and their political systems. From utopias, tried and tested in the form of phalansteries or garden-cities, to political reforms and changes of regime, the history of the United Kingdom and its Empire, and later that of the independent States of the Commonwealth, has been punctuated by experiments in institutional organisation that were subsequently subjected to trial by concrete reality. As Engels might well have put it, 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating.' Any study of this tumultuous course of historical events would provide us with ample opportunity to indeed verify – or, in some cases, gauge – the reputation for pragmatism our English-speaking neighbours enjoy.

On the other hand, a study of the malleability of the essay as a genre would provide a perfect starting point for a study of inter-disciplinary exchange in intellectual writing. The very changeability of its protean character challenges the notion of discipline itself and the compartmentalisation of knowledge into theory and practice, and this may well explain why intellectuals do indeed find the form so enticing. By reconsidering the notion of genre and crossing boundaries, the essay confronts literature with the question of its own laws. Inventing new narrative forms (*New Journalism*, for example) or perpetuating the tradition of the autobiographical essay in writers as diverse as de Quincey, Woolf, Huxley, Thoreau or Sontag are all part of this process. The importance of the *essay* as a literary form employed habitually by novelists and poets, together with its predominance in editorial and digital production, is worthy of our close attention. In the visual arts, the *essay cinema* or *cinematic essay* which lies at the intersection between the documentary, fiction and experimental innovation, bears witness to exactly the same desire for a decompartmentalisation between genres.

The role and development of *essay writing* in education in the English-speaking world have made of the essay a key mode of expression and intellectual tool, in contrast with that other model of rhetoric, the dissertation, in which *dispositio* holds pride of place over *elocutio*. One might gainfully wonder why such an opposition does indeed exist (cf. the pre-eminence of the *five-paragraph essay* in secondary and higher education). Over and beyond such educational disparities, perhaps this Anglo-French literary sparring belies two fundamentally distinct visions of literature and its use regardless of their common roots? A genetic approach would posit the need for a pre-text, an embryonic draft worthy of examination in its own right, freed from the shackles of completion, coherence and textual authority and thus allowing the dynamic facet of the essay to be brought to the forefront. The scriptural essay also shares these characteristics. In music, the use of variation and repetition and serial phenomena across artistic movements generally, come within the broader compass of our symposium's focus.

In the field of linguistics, the concept embodied in the essay might lead us to reflect on the tension created by the desire to achieve a given objective (a goal, the route chosen, the course plotted) – whether that desire be accomplished (success) or not (failure, turning back). One might also consider the essay as a trial and error process aimed at confirming and

substantiating speech ('checking tags' are a prime example). In a more epistemological light, one might look at how linguistic data are tried and tested when applied to text corpora. The analysis of oral discourse might shed new light on bungled acts of communication (attempts, reformulations, changes of direction). In historical linguistics, one might examine the different courses taken by language, linguistic forms borrowed then shaken off, stabilisation phenomena and political decisions which have led either to unification processes or, on the contrary, which have supported the teaching of dialects