

Occasional Papers on the Essay: Practice & Form

Playfulnessness: A Note

Brian Doyle

Welcome Table Press Press
Pamphlet Series



October 2010

The Welcome Table Press *Occasional Paper Series on Practice & Form* derives from talks delivered at In Praise of the Essay: Practice & Form, a biannual symposium co-sponsored by Welcome Table Press and Fordham University's English Department & Creative Writing Program.

This talk by Brian Doyle was presented on April 24, 2010.

Welcome Table Press is a nonprofit, independent press dedicated to publishing and celebrating the essay, in all its forms.

Editors:

Kim Dana Kupperman

Heather G. Simons

© 2010 Welcome Table Press

Brian Doyle is the author of seven works of nonfiction, including *The Grail*, *The Wet Engine*, and *Leaping: Revelations & Epiphanies*, as well as two collections of “proems.” A novel, *Mink River*, is forthcoming in fall 2010. His work has appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *American Scholar*, *Gourmet*, *Harper's*, *Orion*, the *Times of London*, and elsewhere. He is the editor of *Portland Magazine*.



www.welcometablepress.org

Playfulnessness: A Note

Brian Doyle

Thesis: The essay is the widest, fattest, most generous, open, glorious, honest, endlessly expandable form of committing prose, not only because it cheerfully steals and hones all the other tools and talents of all other forms of art, and not only because it is admirably and brilliantly closest to not only the speaking voice but the maundering, shambling, shuffling, nutty, wandering, salty, singing voices in our heads, but because it is the most playful of forms, liable to hilarity and free association and startlement, without the filters and mannered disguises and stiff dignity of fiction and poetry and journalism, respectively.

Let me give you an example right off the bat. I'm just riffing for a moment with the typewriter, borrowing a small son and dragooning him into burbling over this way and banging with one finger. We get *ffff* and *rrrr* and *bmbmbm*, which immediately sound jazzy to me, and send me off thinking about the gleaming glimmering horns in the velvet dark of the jazz club in New York that my sister took me into when I was a teenager, and thinking about the jazzy phonemes my kids started off language with when they were little and spent a lot of time humming consonantal bursts and vowelacious arias, and thinking about how maybe typewriters remember what you type with them, maybe they actually steer you in certain directions for their own devious entertainment, and this sets me thinking about my dad teaching me to type with two furious fingers on his old, tall, black, steel typewriter, and the sheaves of love poems he typed to my mom in blazing dripping afternoons in Manila just before he was sure he was about to die in the invasion of Japan. So here, in the space of two minutes, we have leapt from jazz to jazzy infants to intelligent typewriters to a lanky young sergeant hammering words onto infinitesimally thin sheets of onion-skin paper as parakeets and bulbuls yammered outside in the dense

heat, words he thought for sure would be his last, words he desperately wanted to get down before he never saw the girl with the hair to her waist and that irresistible overbite ever again. There, in two minutes, are a whole bunch of essay starts. Is there any other form that can go so fast and piercingly and honestly and nattily, cutting holes in your heart along the way?

Nah.

Or here's another example. My grandfather John Francis Clancey, who was raised in Hell's Kitchen in New York City, not far from where we sit today, had a heart attack on the train one day. I always wanted to try to write about that. I tried to write it as fiction, but fiction was too mannered and arty and remote for me somehow. So, finally, I tried to write it like it really and truly happened. I couldn't write it as straight reportage because it sounded too flat and confessional. But thank God Plutarch invented the essay, because I could come at it in an essay, like this:

A savage raging pain explodes in his chest so suddenly and cruelly that it knocks him to his knees and only by shooting his arms out blindly and landing on his hands does he avoid smashing his face on the floor oh god oh god he thinks faintly from far far away he can't breathe uh uh uh uh uh uh gasping uh uh uh uh but desperately raggedly he gains a half a breath uh uh uh and gulping uh uh a whole one uh uh then another uh and greedily aah he fills aaah his lungs as deeply as he can aaaah he would eat all the air in the world if he could aaaaah he would suck it dry the blessed air aaaaah and somehow the friendly air aaaaah forces the fire in his chest down aaahh and the rage retreats snarling aaaaah and he kneels there aaaah breathing aaah his shoulders shaking aah his knees throbbing ah his sweat dripping freely to the floor ah his mind whispering o god o god o god...

You see what I mean? The essay gets there on the express train. Fiction can get there too, but there's always a polite conductor standing in the way—the gatekeeper, the man you cannot ignore, the guy who whispers “this is all made up, remember that,” even as the very best fiction, while invented, is utterly true. It's a puzzle, eh?

The essay is a jackdaw, a magpie, a raven. It picks up everything and uses it. It borrows everything and bends everything to its nefarious porpoises. The quick sketch of character and moodiness and evocativeness and action of fiction, the musicality and cadence and swing and rhythm and crisp imagery and line-cracking power of poetry, the play and banter and battle of voices of the theater, the camera eye of film, the shapeliness of sculpture (I always wanted to write an essay about weight that would actually get skinnier as you went along, with occasional binges where it bulges out again, wouldn't that be cool? Or an essay about mountains that parades up and down alpinally, or an essay about caribou migration, say, that goes along for fifty pages but only two inches high, or an essay about windows with windows in it, seems to me you have a bigger playing field physically with essays than you do with poems), the athleticism and grace of dance, all these things are meat for the essayist—and the essay, because of its form and size, lends itself more to playfulness in terms of speed and pace and timing than other written forms. Poems are bursts (and really, if we are being honest, all long poems, especially book-length poems, don't really work as *poems*, do they? they're just too looooooong, you know? who really thinks of the *Odyssey* or the *Illiad* or, God help us all, that incredibly boring prison sentence called *Paradise Lost* as a poem?). Plays and novels and nonfiction books are long. Songs are playful (think of Joe Cocker's "You Can Keep Your Hat On"), but songs, when you think about it, are two art forms married to each other. Which is why music with lyrics is perhaps the greatest art form of all, seems to me. But of written art, I think essays are the coolest, widest, broadest, biggest form. Everything fits in the essay, and it's nearly naked.

Right about here scholarly people will say, "Yeah, well, got any examples, got any documentation, got any illustrations?" And being a happy student of the glory of the essay in the greatest of hands I say, "Sweet Jesus, yes." Think of Natalia Ginzburg's chant and cadence and swing, the tennis match of her great essay "He and I": "He is hot and I am cold. He loves libraries and I hate them. He loves travelling. I would like to stay at home all the time." She steals litany and music from poetry. Or think of Robert Louis Stevenson's glorious, furious "Open Letter to the Reverend Doctor Hyde," the blunt terse judicial accusatory tone—you, you, you—echoes of the courtroom speech, the case for the

prosecution. And then it flies up and away into an extraordinary prayer at the end, one of the greatest closing passages in the history of essays, bless his soul, that poor man, dead at forty-four. He crams fury and spiritual genius into what seems for a while like straight reportage or notes from a deposition and makes it dance. Or the genius Annie Dillard, with her broken-whiskey-glass-and-ten-packs-of-cigarettes-a-day voice, in her extraordinary essay “Living Like Weasels,” which begins like any old “nature essay” (man, what a reductive and thus dismissive term that is) about paying attention to that which we hardly pay any real attention to (this being the subject of all essays, really), and suddenly goes *flying into the brain and soul of the weasel*, o my god o sweet Jesus wow. Doesn't she steal the imaginative fire of the best fiction, in a hundredth of the space, and make a dart to the heart?

Not to be rude or try to start a fire, but just to gently ask if we're totally sure the emperor is wearing his undies today, isn't one of the great virtues of the essay that it's short? With total respect for doorstep novels and muscular nonfiction epics like Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* or Jan Morris' brilliant *Pax Britannica* trilogy, isn't short almost always better than long? I hear everyone gasping with horror, but c'mon, let's be honest, isn't an arrow better than a tank when it comes to hitting hearts and heads? And isn't hitting hearts and heads the point? And isn't using the arrow that might hit the most hearts quickest perhaps the best idea? So if lots and lots of people will read a brief talkative odd funny pointed cheerful testy voice talking at them from a page, or a screen, or a radio, or whatever cool toy our children will invent next, but not so many people will spend a week with a really big book, or try to decipher a poem, or endure the dental work that is an awful lot of journalism, or see through the glittering neurotic screen that is so much short fiction, well, doesn't that mean perhaps that the essay is the form with the most pop and verve and connective electricity? Could that be? Could it be that we are gathered at what today is actually a team meeting for the form that could maybe most change the universe as we know it? Could it be that maybe I am right for a change, and for once am not a complete and utter doofus and bonehead?

And a last note about shapeliness. If we grant for a moment that I am right and that essays are glorious because they are, for the most part,

unfiltered, and so a direct and unadorned and naked form, which is good; and we grant also that the essay is the closest form to the human voice, which is good, because we listen easily and naturally to voices and don't have to strain and labor and work and digest, we just dig the voice, as we were trained to do since even before we were born; and if we grant also that the essay is particularly cool because it's short and direct and a dagger and a dart rather than an epic or labor or doorstep or something you really are going to get around to next summer when you have time, which you won't; that still leaves that nagging question that I get all the time from smart-ass high-school sophomores: What's the difference between an article and an essay? Hey, Mister, all these cool things you say about essays, don't they apply to articles in the best hands, articles written by great storycatchers and storytellers like Mike Royko and Murray Kempton and Dexter Filkins and Anna Quindlen and the late, great Molly Ivins? To which I say, well, yes, except that journalism in general has to stay on a road, has to have an aura of information, has to at least pretend to be reasonable, whereas essays run anywhere they like. Essays, I would maintain, are also shapelier, more attentive to beginning and middle and end, more attuned to the ways and means by which we tell stories. Essays maybe are a little more carpentered, you know? And more liable to be more vehicles for discovery rather than mere knowledge. Think how many times in your own work you were typing along happily, cursing and humming, and suddenly you wrote something you didn't know you felt so powerfully, and maybe you cried right there by the old typewriter, and marveled, not always happily, at what dark threads your typing had pulled from the mysterious fabric of your heart. Maybe that happens the most with essays. This could be.

To return to the original thesis: The essay is the most playful and coolest form because it is the most naked. It is without much artifice, in the end; only enough to build a lean-to on the page for the reader and the writer to live in, for a few minutes. It is not a song by the fire, as poetry is, as poetry was certainly born to be; it is not a vast house in which there are many mansions, as novels and other prose tomes are; it is not the terse ostensibly neutral (or neutered) reportage that journalism is, or the casual, shaggy, gossipy confessional that a letter is as its best; nor is it a song, a rant, a note, a blog, a speech (although a great speech is

sometimes eerily close to a great essay, yes?); and along with all that it is not, it is not usually disguised or mannered in any way. As a general rule, the essay is a clap on the back, a hand outstretched to be grasped, a blunt voice in your ear. Every other genre has some filter, some jacket it wears, some attitude it is supposed to have, some definition that hovers around it like a nimbus, but not the essay; the only definition that applies to the essay is that it be an adventure, a walk in the woods, an idea pushed and prodded and poked and played with. If an essay leans too much toward the scholarly, it becomes a doddering avuncular article; too far over toward a mere parade of facts, and it smells like journalism; too stern and instructive and scoldacious, and it morphs into lecture and sermon and homily; too spitting mad and uncontrolled and it is a rant, or Ann Coulter's diary; too uncontrolled and wandering and it is perhaps a blog entry, a letter, notes for an essay to be made. Direct and unadorned, for the most part—that is the essay. No frills, no filters, no manners, no capering motley, not much ego. It is not only closest to the speaking voice, which is why I love it so, but it is perhaps closest to the inner voice we all have in the deepest chambers of our hearts. Maybe that is why it is finally such a powerful form, the essay; not because it's closest to us, but because it *is* us.