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JEFF DOLVEN

Remembering the Essay

What do I remember of Michel de Montaigne's essay "De la Mémoire"? Above all, his vigorous self-deprecation: No one's memory is worse than his. He reads listlessly and without retention. He has forgotten his Greek. He makes reference, as I recall, to Plato's *Meno*, the dialogue in which a slave boy's ability to learn geometry is attributed to a kind of original memory of mathematical law. He doesn't think much of the idea, preferring to treat knowledge as the precipitate of experience. Somewhere along the way, he must retell the story of Simonides, the ancient founder of the *ars memoria*, who stepped out of a dinner party just before the roof caved in and was able to identify the disfigured bodies because he could reconstruct the guests' positions around the table. Simonides' feat is a wonder, but alien to Montaigne's vagrant habits of recall. Or must have been alien, if I know Montaigne. At some point in this increasingly dubious exercise, I pick up my copy of the *Essays* and scan the table of contents to confirm what I half-knew from the start, which is that there is, in fact, no essay on memory there. Though much of what I recalled is be found scattered in his book. There might well have been one, I console myself.

One way of dividing up kinds of writing is to consider how they offer themselves to the memory. How do you remember what you read? You can hang everything about a novel on its story; episodes and atmospheres depend on your recall of what happened next. Somewhere back in the history of the novel is the epic, with its oral formulas to assist the storyteller and its catalogues of famous names. Verse still holds out the hope of memorizing everything, with prompts of meter and rhyme to jog you along. Where recitation fails, it offers abstractions of form, like the structure of a sonnet, to place remembered lines within a whole. In prose, form may be less help, but any writing with an argument has the architecture of its claims and evidence, even the steps of a proof. All of these kinds are constructed according to rules of composition that are also economies of recollection, ways of holding writing together in the mind and bringing it back again at

need. Narrative, rhythm, spatial form, and argument all serve the memory. What, then, of the essay? What are its mnemonic affordances – beyond its customary brevity? It is tempting to say that it has none, and moreover that its refusal to make itself convenient to the memory is among its defining properties.

If this is right – that the essay is at its heart a rebel against memory – then forgetful Montaigne proposes himself, once again, as its great instigator. Francis Bacon, the first English essayist, is an antipodal spirit in so many ways, but joins Montaigne in this antagonism, albeit on his own terms. They are both well remembered in the history of the essay after them, and a preoccupation with memory is one of their bequests. Reading them well asks us to think them in the context of the early modern culture of memory against which they wrote, and that is what this opening essay of our volume will do.

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There used to be a painting at Delphi of a man in Hades braiding a rope, playing it out straight into the mouth of a hungry donkey. Plutarch, the first-century Greek philosopher-historian-priest, tells us in his “On Contentment” that the painting is an image of oblivion. Oblivion “prevents life being a unity of past events woven with present ones,” he writes, and such “constant flux makes each person, in theory, different from himself and then different again.”¹ What redeems human beings from this tragedy of infinite self-separation is memory, a condition of the continuity of the self, and, for Plutarch’s sixteenth-century readers, of the continuity of history. Montaigne was trained up in a veneration of history, especially the classical canon laid down as the foundation of European humanism. He was a nearly native speaker of Latin and, though he had little Greek, he was an avid reader of Plutarch in Jacques Amyot’s translations. He credits Plutarch, along with the Roman Seneca, as his two ancient masters: “my book ... is built entirely out of their spoils.”² Quotations from what have come (under his influence) to be called Plutarch’s “essays” are a habit through all stages of his *Essais*’ twenty-some years of composition. They must have been among the aphorisms Montaigne inscribed on the bookcases and the rafters of the tower library where he wrote, a circumambient encyclopedia of his life of reading.

And yet he explains, in “Of Vanity,” that he loves Plutarch especially for his forgetting. “There are works ... in which he forgets his theme, in which the treatment of his subject is found only incidentally, quite smothered in foreign matter ... Lord, what beauty there is in these lusty sallies and this variation, and more so the more casual and accidental they seem.”³ To make

sense of this romance with forgetfulness, it helps to recall how the students of Montaigne's time were expected to remember. The ancient theorists who guided early modern discussions of memory were the usual suspects. Plato's legacy was the idea of memory as a faculty that puts us in mind of forms and laws.⁴ Aristotle's empiricism was the greater influence, especially his distinction between remembering and recollection, between the past made present in the course of ordinary life (remembering the way home), and deliberate recall (recollecting the facts of a legal case).⁵ Recollection distinguishes humans from animals, for we alone open up the memory to see what is there. To *see*: Memory for Aristotle is fundamentally a matter of images. And see what is *there*: Memory is spatial, and organized topically, which is to say by place, or topos.⁶

Aristotle's influence is important to the *ars memoria* transmitted in the rhetorical tradition, especially the first-century BCE *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, long attributed to Cicero. Its most spectacular form is the technique of the so-called memory palace, which systematizes the principle of Simonides' macabre anecdote. Memory students learn to associate lively images with whatever they want to remember – say, a cup to recall the charge of poisoning in a law case – and then place those images within an imagined building, adding new rooms and corridors and floors as needed, to construct a kind of architectural filing system.⁷ By so strongly associating memory and place, the technique masters time. You don't have to reach back into a memory stratified and corrupted by intervening years, because everything is organized synchronically, systematically, just a short stroll away from wherever you start.

In its strong form, the *ars memoria* enjoyed modest uptake in northern Europe.⁸ Its spatial arrangement was nonetheless the assumption underneath the almost universal practice, among school-educated readers, of commonplacing, keeping a topically organized notebook for the transcription of useful knowledge. The notebook was a little memory palace; the palace, an unfolded notebook. Readers transcribed jewels of wisdom “on” a given topic, courage, say, or kingship, or melancholy. The impatient could glean the treasures of wide reading on the cheap from printed commonplace books such as Frances Mere's *Palladis Tamia* (1598). Critic Claire de Obaldia, in a formulation to which I will return, has described the essay as literature *in potentia*, drafts or notes toward some more finished form: “the essay is, and it is not literature; or rather the essay *is not yet* literature.”⁹ The early modern commonplace book is a collection of essays *in potentia*.

The period's most characteristic prose forms, forms fed by these commonplaces, were well adapted to memorization, the persuasive oration and the sermon both affording highly structured, almost architectural homes for

classical *sententiae* and verses of scripture. Montaigne proclaims himself a serial offender against expectations for a methodical memory, as we will see. But who remembers better how Plutarch forgets, how his essays wander among their concerns, unencumbered by responsibilities of prospectus and reprise? For all the quotation, more or less accurate, throughout Montaigne's work, his Plutarch and his Seneca are most reliably present as a *modus scribendi*, remembered in their style. (As Seneca would say, writers must be taken in as nourishment, "otherwise they will pass into the memory, not into the talent," not into the capable self.¹⁰) The critic Scott Black treats such essayistic digestions of ancient texts as a convergence of reading and writing, in "feedback loops" that animate early modern print culture – ancient text to commonplace book to essay to someone else's commonplace book and so on. Essays are "more like readerly writing than writerly reading," sponsoring "a way of reading that is neither passive nor productive, but a process of thinking through."¹¹ Behind Black's argument is the idea that everything you read, you read to write with, and that writing, conversely, is a way of reading. Or, one might say, remembering not so much the place names as the way along the way.

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Montaigne never forgets himself more drastically than in "On Practice." In the middle of the essay, he recounts an episode from France's civil wars – "During the third of our disturbances (or was it the second, I do not remember which)"¹² – when he was out riding, a league from his estate, and one of his men, mounted on a powerful farm horse, ran him down from behind. His companions take him for dead and carry him the half-league back to the house; the essay briskly recounts his coming to, vomiting blood, and suffering the attentions of his frightened household. He lingers, however, over the deliquescence of his swoon. "I found it pleasant to languish and to let myself go," he recalls; he enjoys "that gentle feeling which is felt by those who let themselves glide into sleep." The experience confirms what he has long suspected: Death can present a horrible aspect to those who witness it, but that aspect deceives. Now he can remember it and it was good. "The memory of this, being deeply planted in my soul, paints for me the face of Death and her portrait so close to nature that it somewhat reconciles me to her."¹³

What is this singular episode, this death before death, doing in an essay on practice, on the daily and the ordinary, "De l'Exercitation"? The opening pages – before he gets to the accident – are a Stoic meditation on the value of exercising the soul in virtue and hardening the self against life's travails. "Reasoning and education cannot easily prove powerful enough

to bring us actually to do anything, unless in addition we train and form our Soul by experience.”¹⁴ But how to practice for death? Montaigne’s accident is an extraordinary gift to a man preoccupied with this question. He observes that he was able even *in extremis* to command his servants and order a horse for his wife. Such acts of domestic competence are automatic, thoughtless, “produced by my senses themselves, doubtless from habit.” His inner condition meanwhile is “agreeable and peaceful” and his mind is free.¹⁵ Even his narration afterward lets go happily of details. During which of the several crises of the wars did this happen? Was I a league or half a league away from my house, my library, my affairs? The swoon seems to allow him to forget, and yet to be wonderfully aware, conscious without quite being conscious *of*.

He cuts off these reflections at the point when he finally recalls, days later, the accident itself, a memory that strikes him like a lightning bolt. Still he tries to keep the lesson of the swoon: “This account of so unimportant an event is pointless enough but for the instruction I drew from it for my own purposes: for in truth, to inure yourself to death all you have to do is to draw nigh to it.” In the remaining pages he turns to a project of self-study. “I examine nothing, I study nothing, but me; and if I do study anything else, it is so as to apply it at once to myself, or more correctly, within myself.”¹⁶ Here is the studious subjectivity for which Montaigne is so famous. That self, under the attentions of the essay, can be laid exactly, even surgically bare, “the veins, the muscles and the tendons” open to scrutiny; one part of him is revealed “by the act of coughing; another by my turning pale or by my palpitations.”¹⁷ But these clues to the quotidian self are also signs of death, and as the essay moves away again from the accident, not to return, Montaigne’s new art of self-description becomes an art of forgetting. Plato complained, as Montaigne well knew, that the invention of writing was death to the memory. His essay complies willingly with the loss. It is structured not for recapitulation, not for laying up thought against time, but for letting go as it goes.

Indeed: “I am so outstanding a forgetter,” Montaigne writes in “On Pre-sumption,” “that, along with all the rest, I forget even my own works and writings.” The essay makes a comic survey of his lapses and incuriosities:

Most of our coins I do not recognize; unless it is all too obvious I do not know the difference between one grain and another, neither in the ground nor in the barn ... And since I must reveal the whole of my shame, only a month ago I was caught not knowing that yeast is used to make bread and what was meant by “fermenting” wine.¹⁸

This performance of embarrassment is sly praise for tacit knowledge, which has served him perfectly well in trade and eating and drinking. It

is as though the essays long for their own knowledge to lapse into such wordless practicality. But against such claims the reader must weigh the extraordinary variety of quotations, citations, and anecdotes that leaven the work, their words well remembered even if Montaigne often claims to have forgotten their sources. If a given essay forgets them as it goes – forgets them simply in moving on – it must first remember them, and reproduce them, from what must be a great supply. “Of the Cannibals” begins with three such stories from Plutarch, each recounting an occasion when Greek soldiers first encounter, with surprise, the order and good discipline of the Roman legions. These anecdotes inaugurate a wandering meditation on the natives of the Americas and on who is a barbarian to whom. The connections are metonymic, rather than metaphoric; local associations, from link to link of a chain, report and travel narrative, and Seneca and Virgil, rather than coordinated expressions of a governing conceit.

It is of course still open to the reader to ask, what this essay, “Des Cannibales,” is really *about*. What is the metaphor that is the more or less secret meaning of all of its elements – the vertical organization that can explain its lateral travel? One answer might be, cruelty.¹⁹ Near the middle of the essay Montaigne takes up the custom of his title and gives an anthropological account of how the natives dispatch a captive enemy, cook, and eat him, generously “sending chunks of his flesh to absent friends.”²⁰ But he cannot consider their barbarity without reflection on his own culture: There is

more barbarity in lacerating by rack and torture a body still fully able to feel things, in roasting him little by little and having him bruised and bitten by pigs and dogs (as we have not only read about but seen in recent memory, not among enemies in antiquity but among our fellow-citizens and neighbours—and, what is worse, in the name of duty and religion) than in roasting him and eating him after his death.²¹

No taboo, neither desecrating nor even eating the dead, matters to Montaigne more than living pain. It is a clarion moral judgment, and yet it enjoys little rhetorical punctuation. He passes easily on to the valor of the cannibals’ warriors, and then to their polygamy, which he grants may be objectionable to French wives, but then he wonders, what about Leah, Rachel, and Sarah in the Bible, or for that matter, Stratonice of Syria, who (Plutarch tells us) permitted king Deiotarus the attentions of a “very beautiful chambermaid”?

Typical Montaigne. *Do I contradict myself?* he all but asks. Self-contradiction courts the reproach of forgetfulness. Don’t you remember, you just said *x*, and now you are saying not-*x*? You say you have never been to the Indies; how do you know that their cakes taste “sweet and somewhat insipid”?²² But

contradiction is vital to the essays' moral idiom, their capacity to address complexities of life from which systematic argument could only distract. Memory must make way, must falter, even fail. "Cannibals" ultimately arrives at a scene that would serve, in the hands of another writer, as a narrative climax, the meeting of three natives with Charles IX at Rouen in 1562. At last, the natives speak! Someone in the French party asks a very Montaignian question: What has most amazed the visitors about France? In answer, "they made three points": They are surprised that the boy king Charles, then twelve years old, should command bearded men; that the destitute do not rise up against the rich; and "I am very annoyed with myself for not remembering the third," Montaigne confesses. He does ask one of them about the privileges of rank and learns that a commander will have men to cut a path through the forest for him, wherever he goes. "Not at all bad, that.—Ah! But they wear no breeches ..." ²³ And so the essay ends, offhanded, careless, as though it has stopped bothering to remember itself, to read itself.

It is, of course, a memorable ending, but not because it sets the capstone in an arch. It is the abruptness of its abdication that sticks. This is another route to memory, not fitting the system but making an exception. "The learned do arrange their ideas into species and name them in detail," Montaigne writes in "On Experience."

I, who can see no further than practice informs me, have no such rule, presenting my ideas in no categories and feeling my way—as I am doing here now; I pronounce my sentences in disconnected clauses, as something which cannot be said at once all in one piece. ²⁴

"On Experience" ends the three-book *Essays* and it inhabits most thoroughly the predicament of Montaigne's self-made idiom. Which is to say, the predicament of an essay *on*, or *of*, or *about* experience. The word "experience" splits in two, then as now, in French as in English, keeping pace with the immediacy of sense-perception while also trailing behind in accumulated skill or familiarity or hard knowledge. Whether that latter kind of experience is memory depends on what you think memory is. Montaigne tends to write of memory as recollection, disciplined recall, precisely so that he can perform its failures, and free himself to handle the past tense of experience differently. If his essays had themselves in mind the same way the memory artist remembers the *Aeneid*, or the facts of a law case, they could hardly continue.

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In 1594, when he was thirty-three years old, Francis Bacon opened a notebook to begin the project of transcribing from memory all the

quotations that he could remember from Erasmus, from Virgil, from the Bible, along with proverbs in Latin, French, Spanish, and Italian. He wrote down over 1,600 before he either emptied his reservoir or grew tired of the exercise.²⁵ Three years later he published the first edition of his essays. There are ten of them, each consisting of short paragraphs set off by pilcrow, often just a sentence long. Here is a representative pair from “Of Studies”:

¶ Read not to contradict, nor to believe, but to weigh and consider.

¶ Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested. That is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but cursorily; and some few to be read wholly and with diligence and attention.²⁶

Bacon’s essays are works of advice and have some kinship with manuals of conduct or instruction – *A Godlie Forme of Householde Government* (1598) or *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (1597) – that proliferated in the period. An exemplary *he* and a hortatory *you* are the main characters; the self-scrutinizing, Montaignian *I* is nowhere to be found. The little collection might even be mistaken for another printed commonplace book. But Bacon was wary of how traditional commonplace categories reproduced existing structures of knowledge, “using vulgar and pedantical divisions, not such as pierce to the pith and heart of things.”²⁷ Even in these spare essays *in potentia*, an analytic intelligence shapes their parallelisms, unfolding, in the example above, three distinct reading practices from the figures of tasting, swallowing, and digesting. The book was a notable success, plagiarized even before it was published (it had circulated in manuscript), and reprinted four times.

In the years that separated the first essays from their next edition in 1612 and the last in 1625 – they grew in number and length each time – fortune lifted Bacon up and cast him down again, as he prospered under King James in London’s legal and government establishments; made his off-hours contributions to the new science, such works as *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) and the *Novum Organum* (1620); and then in 1621, as Lord Chancellor, at the height of his power, was convicted of accepting bribes and retired to spend the remainder of his life in study. He read Montaigne in French, and likely also in English, in John Florio’s brilliant 1603 translation, and his essays, as they lengthened, became increasingly discursive. They retained, however, an ostentatious topical discipline alien to his French contemporary. “To seek to extinguish Anger utterly is but a bravery of the Stoics,” he begins the essay “Of Anger.” He continues:

We will first speak how the natural inclination and habit to be angry may be attempered and calmed. Secondly, how the particular motions of anger may be repressed, or at least refrained from doing mischief. Thirdly, how to raise anger or appease anger in another.²⁸

Bacon is as good as his word: The paragraphs that follow correspond to this initial *partitio*, just as tasting, swallowing, and digesting are opened, in “On Studies,” into kinds of reading.²⁹ Instead of the wayfaring perspective of the Montaignian essay, best seen from wherever you happen to be along its path, Bacon begins with a view from above.

It is tempting to treat such self-conscious architectures as evidence of a preset method, and modern readers of the essays may be encouraged in the assumption by Bacon’s place in the history of science. But he could be witheringly skeptical of the methodological programs current in his own moment, and he was at least equally concerned that the structures of formal rhetoric might preempt the recognition and the articulation of new phenomena and new laws. His principal remedy was already center stage in 1597: aphorisms, those pithy sayings drawn from experience. They might start an essay, as in “Of Marriage and Single Life”: “He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune; for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief.”³⁰ They might end one, as in “Of Delays”: “For when things are once come to the execution, there is no secrecy comparable to celerity; like the motion of a bullet in the air, which flieth so swift as it outruns the eye.”³¹ They might erupt in the middle, as in “Of Beauty”: “There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.”³² Bacon values their autonomy, their ability to stand alone, and more than that, their resistance to assimilation by their context: “for discourse of illustration is cut off; recitals of example are cut off; discourse of connexion and order is cut off; descriptions of practice are cut off; so there remaineth nothing to fill the aphorisms but some good quantity of observation.”³³ The aphorism is cut off, that is, from the prejudices, the fore-judgments, built into the conventional orders of discourse. “This delivering of knowledge in distinct and disjointed aphorisms doth leave the wit of man more free to turn and to toss, and to make use of that which is delivered to more several purposes and application.”³⁴ It is as though the aphorism were a usefully inconvenient phenomenon, a found thing, demanding empirical attention.

Bacon the aphorist is, in his essays and elsewhere, equally a maker of images. If aphorisms break the momentum of an argument, his analogies and metaphors create unexpected eddies of attention. “Of Friendship” analyses two “fruits” of friendship, the “peace in the affections” a friend can bring, and “support of the judgment,” before turning in the final paragraph to a third,

“which is like the pomegranate, full of many kernels; I mean aid and bearing a part in all actions and occasions.”³⁵ Or again, in “Of Custom and Education”:

In other things the predominancy of custom is everywhere visible; insomuch as a man would wonder to hear men profess, protest, enrage, give great words, and then do just as they have done before; as if they were dead images, and engines moved only by the wheels of custom.³⁶

The figure of the man of custom as automaton is startling and memorable, independent of any scheme organizing the essay’s larger argument. Bacon has a tendency to take up an idiosyncratic image and develop it as though it were a technical term, as with the fruits of friendship, which can be opened to show the many proxy services of the friend; or elsewhere, in the *Advancement of Learning*, where he develops his four “idols of the mind” (of the tribe, the cave, the marketplace, and the theater) into a taxonomy of bad thinking. The not-quite-deadness of his metaphors, even as they are put to work in argument, sometimes gives the sense of a peculiarly lonely thinker, handling private coin.

Aphorism and image share this strategic estrangement from their context, this refusal to illustrate or ornament. Anne Righter, in a classic essay, describes “the curious configuration of the space” that can open up without warning between any two Baconian sentences.³⁷ Her example is the beginning of “Of Truth,” but “Of Vicissitude of Things” will serve as well:

Salomon saith, “There is no new thing upon the earth.” So that as Plato had an imagination, that “all knowledge was but remembrance”; so Salomon giveth his sentence, that “all novelty is but oblivion.” Whereby you may see, that the river of Lethe runneth as well above ground as below. There is an abstruse astrologer that saith, if it were not for two things that are constant (the one is, that the fixed stars ever stand at like distance one from another, and never come nearer together, nor go further asunder; the other, that the diurnal motion perpetually keepeth time), no individual would last one moment. Certain it is, that the matter is in a perpetual flux, and never at a stay. The great winding-sheets, that bury all things in oblivion, are two: deluges and earthquakes.³⁸

The three opening quotations and the consequential *so*’s in-between give the feeling of a syllogism. Perhaps it follows from Salomon’s stark sententia that all knowledge is remembered, and that anything that seems new must only have been once known and forgotten. One is filling in gaps to say so, and they might be filled otherwise. The ensuing “whereby” has considerable demonstrative confidence, but the image that follows is hard to map to what it demonstrates. Perhaps we forget in life, above ground, as we forget in death, under it? Then immediately on to the abstruse astronomer – he seems to say that without the fixed distances of the stars, and the

rhythm of the day, there would be no index for our own mutability. Then one more confident summary, which gives way abruptly to the distinction between the two winding sheets – “winding sheet” becomes for a moment a new term of art – as though our question all along had been, what are the species of destruction that can wipe away all records, all memory? It would be easy to say that the paragraph is itself an exercise in vicissitude. It might be better to say, in ellipsis. Its trajectory is not a wandering line, like Montaigne’s, lubricated with apology; rather, a scattering of points for us to connect, or even a blast of shot. Its concession to the economies of memory is minimal. How could we remember it, except part by part, by rote?

And Bacon hates rote. There is an extraordinary moment in “On Atheism” when he dismisses the position of the atheist: “The scripture saith, ‘The fool hath said in his heart, there is not God’; it is not said, ‘the fool hath thought in his heart’; so as he rather saith it by rote to himself as that he would have, than that he can throughly believe it.”³⁹ In that “saith” he hears the atheist rehearsing an unfeared claim from memory merely. The contrast is with “thought,” which is something else again. Here he is in a famous passage from his Latin *De Augmentis Scientiarum* of 1623, two years before the last edition of the essays. The ancients have paid too much attention to memory, imagination, and reason, and have neglected the “thinking faculty”:

For he who remembers or recollects, thinks; he who imagines, thinks; he who reasons, thinks; and in a word the spirit of man, whether prompted by sense or left to itself, whether in the functions of the intellect, or of the will and affections, dances to the tune of the thoughts.⁴⁰

To say that both remembering and recollection, memory involuntary and voluntary, are aspects of thinking is to recognize that the past can only arise in present uses, that memory is as much *for* as *of*. The memory is not a repository of finished thought. The essayist has a corresponding responsibility not to fit thinking to rote recall, a responsibility to refuse the conventional economies of formula and structure, for they ordain their own conclusion. Of the kinds of time that writing correlates – reading time, diegetic time, writing time – the essay’s special power is to activate the last, to make the time of the writer’s composition salient to the reader’s encounter. One might say, with Bacon, that this time is the time of thinking. Thinking is the enemy of memory, or of rote memory, at least, and though he loves premeditated structure, his structures are disrupted, by aphorism, by image, from within – he will not stop thinking to write.

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The essay is a reluctant genre. Montaigne and Bacon inaugurate that reluctance. But they are continuous points of reference for what becomes a recognizable, salable kind of book in England: In short order, printers put out William Cornwallis's *Essayes* (1600), Robert Johnson's *Essaies, or Rather Imperfect Offers* (1601), D. T.'s *Essaies Politicke, and Morall* (1608), and so on and on. Most modern literary histories that track the essay through the seventeenth century catch up such eccentrics as Sir Thomas Browne and Robert Burton, perhaps Robert Boyle, along their way to the periodical essays of Addison and Steele. But Cornwallis exemplifies the new form's precocious self-knowledge:

I hold neither Plutarch's, nor none of these ancient short manner of writings, nor Montaigne's, nor such of this latter time to be rightly termed essays, for though they be short, yet they are strong, and able to endure the sharpest trial; but mine are essays, who am but newly bound prentice to the inquisition of knowledge, and use these papers as a painter's boy a board, that is trying to bring his fancy and his hand acquainted.⁴¹

The figure of the apprentice mixing paints on his palette is a wonderful bit of essayistic diffidence: His work is stubbornly preparatory, unbegun, as though the essay were just a way of teaching the hand to speak. Cornwallis' essays claim to know better than to rise above their own immediacy; they graciously depart when they are done; they recognize themselves in being weak and amateur, minor literature *avant la lettre*, in the sense that they declare no challenge to the way we live, seek only to fit in and make small accommodations of attitude. A novel will keep you up too late; essays suit a scheduled day. (His "Of Sleep" is written in the hour set aside for a midday nap.)

If I find something subtly discouraging about reading Cornwallis now, perhaps it is that he knows his own genre so well. Such confident formulations of modesty become conventional: In 1671, Thomas Culpeper can aver that the essay

admits of no positive definition, which might be the reason, that neither their great Essays [Essayist] Montaigne, nor the Lord Bacon our more incomparable writer in the same kind, hath thought it requisite to define the word, because it hath so little to do with the matter it handles.⁴²

There is a difference between trying to do something in particular, something of a given kind, and just *trying*. I sometimes want to account anything a poem that has a ragged right-hand margin. But sometimes I want to say, with a sense of rare occasion, and according to emergent criteria, *now* this is a poem. Essays are so many and the barriers to entering the category are

low, but there are still moments when I find myself saying, *now this is an essay*. When I do so it is usually because it neither knows what it is, nor knows that it is not supposed to know.

It helps, in vivifying some of the critical commonplaces – that the essay is an attempt, that it is preliminary, that it is subjective – to recognize at any moment in its history what it pushes off against, where it must win its aimless freedom, the sources of its potential shame when it is asked what kind it is. The early modern essay, answering to that question, is especially not an oration. It fails the inherited methods and structures of persuasive speech, refuses the fantasies of virtuoso persuasion in court and courtroom or the dream of a Roman senate. Likewise it is not a sermon. The cathedral memory-patterning of Donne at the pulpit is very different. Perhaps I remember an essay more the way I remember a conversation? Perhaps one conversation of many with a friend, not being sure when it was exactly that she said that, or where. (Could there be a friend of only one conversation? An essayist who wrote only one essay?) Perhaps I remember best the swerve, the startling aphorism, the brilliant image. Not the structure of the argument, but just where the essay defied my expectation for that structure – defied what I remembered about it before I read it. Which might be to say that early modernity teaches the essay to follow what it learned from Plutarch and Seneca, and what it keeps learning from Montaigne and Bacon: that memory is thinking. And also the insight of Jorge Luis Borges, in his story “Funes, His Memory”: *pensar es olvidar*, to think is to forget.⁴³

Notes

- 1 Plutarch, *Essays*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Penguin, 1992), 229.
- 2 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003), 817.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 1125.
- 4 The most important discussion is in his *Meno* (81a–98a); also influential is the discussion in the *Phaedrus* of the erosive effects of writing on memory (274b–275b). Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997).
- 5 Andrew Hiscock offers a useful summary of early modern reception of ancient memory theory in *Reading Memory in Early Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6–15.
- 6 Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 449b5–453b10.
- 7 The image is from the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 215. The classic treatment of the *ars memoriae* is Frances Yates’s *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).

- 8 Erasmus, the most important educational theorist of the sixteenth century, cautions, "I do not deny that memory is aided by 'places' and 'images'; nevertheless ... memory largely consists in having thoroughly understood something." *On the Method of Study*, in *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 24, trans. Brian McGregor (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 671.
- 9 Claire de Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 16.
- 10 Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letters on Ethics*, trans. Margaret Graver and A. A. Long (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 285. "Talent" translates Seneca's *ingenium*.
- 11 Black, *Essays and Reading*, 55.
- 12 Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, 418.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 419.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 416.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 422–423.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 423–424.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 426.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 741.
- 19 David Quint finds hatred of cruelty at the ethical center of the *Essays* as a whole. See *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 42–74.
- 20 Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, 235.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 235–236.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 234.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 241.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 1222.
- 25 Francis Bacon, "Promus of Formularies and Elegancies," in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, vol. 1, ed. Alan Stewart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 553–582.
- 26 Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 81. References in parentheses in the text are to this edition.
- 27 Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. 4, eds. James Spedding, R. L. Ellis, and D. D. Heath (Boston, MA: Houghton and Mifflin, 1857–1874), 435.
- 28 Bacon, *Francis Bacon*, 449.
- 29 The most comprehensive discussion of Bacon's style remains Brian Vickers, *Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968). On *partitio*, see pp. 30–60; on aphorisms, see pp. 60–96.
- 30 Bacon, *Francis Bacon*, 353.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 383.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 425.
- 33 Bacon, *Works*, 3.405.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 7.321.
- 35 Bacon, *Francis Bacon*, 395.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 419.
- 37 Anne Righter, "Francis Bacon," in *Essential Articles for the Study of Francis Bacon*, ed. Brian Vickers (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1968), 319.
- 38 Bacon, *Francis Bacon*, 451.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 371.
- 30

- 40 Bacon, *Works*, 4.324. Rhodri Lewis quotes this passage and comments, “Bacon’s emphasis on what we *do* when engaging in thought is fundamental to the way in which he approached the memory.” “A Kind of Sagacity: Francis Bacon, the *Ars Memoriae* and the Pursuit of Natural Knowledge,” *Intellectual History Review* 19.2 (2009): 170.
- 41 William Cornwallis, *Essayes* (London: 1632), Bb8v.
- 42 Thomas Culpeper, *Essayes or Moral Discourses on Several Subjects* (London, 1671), B1r. This passage is reproduced in Black, whose modernized spelling I have adopted, in *Essays and Reading*, 132.
- 43 Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 1999), 137. Though my recollection is incomplete: The full sentence is “To think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract.”