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'setting it free': The Essay Today

Mario Relich

Setting the essay free from the shackles of critical theory, or getting entangled in the groves of academe, is what distinguishes *Imagined Spaces.* It reads as a fiercely idiosyncratic anthology of the diverse ways in which the essay form has attracted writers in our time. Its seventeen essays by various contributors, can be loosely divided into four parts, made up of four essays each, except for the penultimate one, which is made up of five essays. The editors, Gail Low, Senior Lecturer in English, and the novelist Kirsty Gunn, are based at the University of Dundee. Dundee itself features prominently in the introductory essay, 'Tracing Lines…Essaying For Our Times', co-written by the editors. In fact, no less than seven of the essays, or just over a third, are co-authored, in effect dialogues, which is why the total number of contributors is twenty-four. Their essay is one of four which attempt to define the parameters of the essay form, particularly now.

Walking is a central metaphor in the Low/Gunn essay, a recurrent motif in other essays as well. The introductory essay describes one or other of the two contributors walking leisurely over the Tay Road Bridge to the small town of Newport on the other side. The contributor declares that between 'the seagulls, the rivers and the flowers, I think this is what I want from essaying, to be surprised by and into life' (p. 8). It's a definition which alights on the beneficial effect an essay might have on the reader, rather than a static, limited one. The contributors, in fact, propose a kind of manifesto for what essay-writing now has to oppose: 'No more narcissistic parades, then – life writing that is always me, me, me – but using instead personal experience to make another kind of communal story where both reader and writer might take up residence and find a home in words' (p. 13).

Linda E. Chown, Professor Emerita at Grand Valley State University, Michigan, comes up with her own flexible definitions in 'The Art of the Intransitive Essay.' Her concept of *bethinking* is particularly intriguing: 'a considering or pondering something carefully, for the pleasure of being with it, whatever it is first, and then knowing it more' (p. 108). It's a concept that gets to the heart of the essay form, and actually a more deeply considered extension of Virginia Woolf's definition in *The Modern Essay*: 'The principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure'.[1] Chown calls the modern style of the form 'the intransitive essay', which 'necessarily begins with the inner life', as did Montaigne's writing. Arguably, he invented the modern essay; her discussion of him suggests as much. She advises practitioners of the 'intransitive essay' in the following terms: 'Probably the main new thing when you begin writing intransitively is to see *who* and *what* you are becoming in relation to your own thinking and reading and to the writing upon which you're connecting' (p. 195).

The exchange of conversational emails between Emma Holland and Elizabeth Chakrabarty suggests that the essay form is well placed for expressing the insecure nature of life, their contribution entitled 'The Fiction of the Essay: Of Abstraction, Texts,

[1] Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: First Series*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975) 267.

Communication and Loss.' It's how essays fictionalize personal stories, as a way of retrieving what is lost that is most useful about the form in today's world. Chakrabarty, the 'Notes on Contributors' tell us, is especially concerned with exploring 'themes of race and sexuality', while Holland as artist-writer is intent on 'investigating the problematics and ambiguities of an expanded understanding of translation.' Inspired by Lacan's commentary on Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Purloined Letter*, and acute awareness that we live in precarious and unstable times, both are open-ended in their discussion. At one point, the 'object-relations' psychoanalyst W. R. D. Fairbairn is mentioned, but his name is misspelled; the error was no doubt missed at the proof-reading stage. Otherwise, the conversation sparkles with immaculate erudition. About their approach, Chakrabarty observes that the most interesting essays 'overturn the tradition and encourage what we're doing, turning the gaze, exploring why we do what we do', and questioning 'what's beneath the veneer of structures, perceived narratives and the fiction of reality' (p. 186). Intriguingly, their essay 'turns our gaze' on seven photographs, captioned 'Together, writing, Southbank, 2019', of their hands at different stages writing on A-4 notebooks. The photographs seem remarkably intimate, like the essay form itself.

Philip Lopate in 'My Love Affair With the Essay' has a more traditional approach to defining the essay. He mentions not only Montaigne as past practitioners, but also Hazlitt, Lamb, Emerson, and more recent ones like James Baldwin, and Joan Didion. Among others, he quotes Samuel Johnson's definition as 'a loose sally of the mind', but he does have his finger on the pulse regarding modern developments; e.g., saying about essays that 'they appeal to the contemporary moment's hunger for confiding voices, as witnessed elsewhere in TV talk shows and reality shows' (p. 174). Lopate himself is a distinguished American essayist.

Chris Arthur, who 'has published several essay collections', collaborates with Graham Johnston, 'artist and creative nomad', in 'Line Drawing', one of four essays which may be said to focus on 'geopoetics'. The section on 'Tracing Consciousness' is especially interesting. They argue that the essay is ideal for 'capturing the moment', pointing out that essayists have always 'been fascinated by consciousness and have variously tried to give accounts of what it contains as the mind engages with whatever aspects of the world has given rise to a particular essay' (p. 37).

Lorens Holm, who teaches architecture at Dundee, and Paul Noble, architect and town planner of 'widespread international recognition', provides another conversational two-hander, indeed a philosophical symposium, in 'Politics of Small Places'. It's very detailed, illustrated with diagrams and art reproductions of work by Noble himself. One of the illustrations reproduces Patrick Geddes's 'Charting of Life' diagram from his visionary book *Cities in Evolution*. Much of their conversation is precisely about cities, 'small places', indeed intimate ones, to those who live in them, how they develop, and how they could be improved.

Dundee figures again in 'Mind the Gap', by Susan Nickalls, 'writer, journalist, broadcaster and award-winning film maker based in Edinburgh'. She begins her essay as follows: 'As the train I'm on clatters across the Tay Rail Bridge, I scan the rain-soaked foreshore for my first glimpse of Scotland's new £80 million design museum, V & A Dundee' (p. 72). Her chosen essayistic medium is the interview, and the interviewee here is the Japanese architect who designed it, Kengo Kuma. The essence of Kuma's aims as an architect are encapsulated in the following observation on his part: 'My stance in every field

has been to be skeptical of any logic that does not have gaps. My ideal is an architecture in which truth resides in the gaps' (p. 80). Graham Johnston's 'compressed charcoal on printed paper' illustration at the end of the Nickalls essay, entitled *'V & A Dundee,* Exterior Study', which captures part of the museum's façade, makes it look like a ridged cave full of gaps, thus uniting nature and architecture.

In 'Home, Ile, Ghar, Hame', Tomwa Folorunso, of Nigerian heritage, and Hamza Hussain, of Pakistani heritage, explore the concept of 'Home', 'Ile' in Yoruba, 'Ghar' in Urdu, and 'Hame' in Scots. Both are writers, with Hussain based in Dundee, and Folorunso in Edinburgh. Folorunso makes a Freudian slip when he describes 'staring at the Scot's monument when rain hits my face', but Walter Scott of course was indeed a Scot, and one who wrote novels which do deal with issues of identity. Like Scott did in his time, both writers explore shifting identities, or 'modal shifting', enhanced by dialogue between them. Their exchange results in creative duality, despite occasional bureaucratic obstacles in their lives. As Hussain puts it, 'I can be whomever you want me to be, because that's what I do. It's easier than breathing' (p. 148). Folorunso makes a similar point about his own dual identity: 'No matter how much this world tries to force me to choose between them, they're always together, unable to exist without each other' (p. 146).

The process of creativity itself is highlighted in another five of the essays. Whitney McVey, an American artist, based in London, 'best known for her installations, sculpture and paintings', does so with aphoristic comments on her own semi-abstract work through what looks like the medium of ink. Both in her work and comments, she likes to be boldly enigmatic: 'Doubt, uncertainty are passions for the artist, only understood by those in communion with their materials' (p. 136).

Gabriel Josipovici, one of the most renowned literary critics, is more direct about creativity in his essay, 'On Being Hit in the Head by a Poem' – a refreshingly audacious title. It's a close analysis of T.S. Eliot's poem *Sweeney Among the Nightingales,* but with a difference. He is not intent on 'explaining' the poem, still less idolising Eliot, as academic critics tend to do. He tells us that he reacted to Eliot's poem viscerally, not just in terms of an intellectual appreciation: 'And that is still how it seems to me whenever I re-read that poem, or any of the poems and novels that do that to me' (p. 44).

Duncan McLean, who lives in Orkney, and Kenny Taylor, editor of *Northwords Now,* in their exchange 'The Flicker of the North' discuss the creative possibilities unleashed when re-imagining the idea of 'the North'. McLean remarks that 'tourists are attracted to places by fictional animals like Nessie and fictionalised versions of real people like Mary Queen of Scots …', but he crucially adds that what attracts and excites you and me is just as fictional: the notion that "North" is something more than a relative geographical description; the idea that George Mackay Brown's fantasies describe an Orkney that ever really existed' (p. 127). Taylor in reply points out that nevertheless 'there's something more than the simple law of averages that means that some great writers, past and present, have come from northern countries' (p. 129). A fascinating exchange results about two Norwegian writers, Knut Hamsun, and the less well-known Sigrid Undset. While the Nobel laureate Hamsun ended up a pro-Nazi, Undset joined the resistance.

'Songs I Can't Play', by the Australian novelist Stephanie Bishop, delves deeply into the psyche of a young woman learning how to play the cello. She finds that it's a visceral process not unlike Josipovici responding to T. S. Eliot's poem: 'The challenge is to find the

song in the air and run it through my body, that has developed over time like sediment and give it shape, *set it free'* (p. 23, my italics).

'A Voyage Out in Education', by Jane Macrae, a Science teacher in London for many years, explores how the curriculum in secondary schools can be made more creative. Her project to this end was to create 'courses based on harmony and its principles that could be incorporated into the curriculum.' She argues that this does not entail changing the curriculums as such, but encouraging teachers to be more innovative, a process which involves 'asking teachers to re-think what they were teaching in their various subjects' (p. 114). One practical example, 'a simple activity using the senses', involved pupils 'smelling a little heap of damp soil when reading a text about the effects of poor farming practices on the soil.' The effect was that much was 'revealed about the soil by connecting to it in this way', making for 'an enlivening experience!' (p. 115).

The final four essays considered here look into the darker aspects of 'being human'. In 'You by Me: Writing Depression', Stephen Carruthers and Fiona Stirling conduct a dialogue, much of it in a fragmented style, reminiscent of R. D. Laing, on the various stages of depression. Carruthers is a teacher based in the Scottish Highlands who describes himself as 'a keen advocate for the benefits of creative writing both in education and mental health.' Stirling is a writer and practicing therapist 'passionate about exploring mental health through narratives and collaborative work with those who have lived experience.' Her essayistic collaboration with Carruthers does just that. It is so powerful that it should be turned into a drama, just right for the modern stage.

'Between the Lines', by Dai John, switches the meaning of 'lines' as an artistic technique to an existentially dangerous military meaning. It has very much to do with territory, or 'space', a not entirely imagined one at that, and who actually controls it at any given time. John himself 'has served with the military for over 30 years', and 'has produced a number of U.K. and NATO defence policy publications.' His essay chronicles the psychological tensions involved during his tour of duty in the summer of 1999 as part of the Nato-led Kosovo Force (KFOR), whose purpose was to protect local civilians against the threat of Serb massacres. Based on journal entries, his essay pays minute attention to detail, and dangers faced. It has all the trappings of a cautionary short story for our times.

'A Leaf Out of Someone's Book', a two-page essay by Graham Domke, 'freelance curator and critic based in Glasgow', is both art appreciation and poetic elegy. It celebrates his friend John Calcutta, himself a teacher, art curator, and influential critic, who died, while not yet reaching 40, in 2018, so the essay is pretty much an immediate, yet not overly sombre, response to his friend's untimely death. Both were fond of collecting leaves and greatly taken by contemporary art. His great admiration for Calcutta is lucidly expressed in the following recollection: 'His roundabout way of taking ideas for a walk was inspirational to all who crossed paths with him' (p. 191). He was, in short, as Domke puts it at the beginning of his contribution, 'a great essayist' (p. 190).

Death is directly faced in 'Life in the Bardo: Dying, Death and the Imagination', by Edinburgh-based Australian novelist Meaghan Delahunt. The essay draws on her experience as a creative writing tutor in a hospice, and looking after her mother's in her final days. It is a profoundly moving one, informed as well by spiritual guidance from Tibetan Buddhism. Suffice it here to point to her comments on the artist Damien Hirst and his famous stuffed shark. She informs us that 'Hirst's first shark sculpture, after only two years, had begun to

disintegrate' in its Saatchi Gallery vitrine. Hirst therefore decided to replace the shark for its new owner, a fund manager: 'And so a new shark was caught off the coast of Australia (a female tiger shark in her middle years) and shipped in formaldehyde to Hirst' (pp. 87-88). Her contempt for art of this sensationalist kind is unmistakeable: 'But I reject the shark as a Western metaphor for the unimaginable – for death.' She adds that 'such an association seems to close down an imaginative space rather than opening it up' (p. 88).

The sheer diversity of essayists in *Imagined Spaces*, and their innovative styles of writing, makes the anthology, edited with such aplomb by Gail Low and Kirsty Gunn, essential reading. To quote from their introduction, these exemplary essays above all offer us 'the opportunity not to write or read simply *about* a subject or an idea, but rather to write and read *into* it, write *towards* it' (their italics, pp. 12-13).

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