

On the Possibilities of the Essay: A Meditation

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When one looks from inside at a lighted window, or looks from above at the lake, one sees the image of oneself in a lighted room, the image of oneself among trees and sky—the deception is obvious, but flattering all the same. When one looks from the darkness into the light, however, one sees all the difference between here and there, this and that. Perhaps all unsheltered people are angry in their hearts, and would like to break the roof, spine, and ribs, and smash the windows and flood the floor and spindle the curtains and bloat the couch.

Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

I

I HAD, it seemed, to my surprise, terror, and delight, bought a house.

It was high summer, July of 1988, the peak of a season of dazzling heat and soul-wrenching drought. As I drove between Iowa City and Dubuque, where I was teaching a seminar, I watched the corn in fields on either side of the two-lane highway shrivel relentlessly week by week under the baking sun until I heard, or thought I heard, as I drove, a very high-pitched keener or wail, coming from the corn, begging for rain.

Moving day arrived when the seminar ended, according to plan. During the weeks I was away teaching, assorted carpenters and dry-wall workers and plumbers and painters had executed my preliminary plans for turning the house into my own. It was—is—a grand house, old and possessed of great dignity, so I had a lot to work with: high ceilings, wide mahogany pocket doors at once dividing and connecting all the downstairs rooms, multiple tall windows looking out on a wide lawn with room for a terrace, a garden, a grape arbor, a bed of multi-hued lilies. A house full of promise, of possibilities.

The unpacking and settling-in were a strain in the dry heat, well over a hundred degrees day after sizzling day. Indulging a fantasy which my new identity as owner of this grand house allowed me, I adopted in interludes the persona and habits of a woman of leisure and splurged on a Yucatan hammock, which I hung between an old box-elder and a leaning cedar not far from the back porch. I took refuge in their shade when fatigue overtook me, swaying as I read. The novel in my hands, as I recall myself in those moments through the screen of memory, is Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*.

Mornings I rose, made coffee, soothed the cat out of her nervousness at waking in a house whose unfamiliarity she had daily to confront anew, and set to work to establish the cleanliness and order I've been taught to believe is next to godliness. My domestic inclinations I gave full rein: this was my home, my haven, nest, stay against the confusion of impermanence, each room a stanza of the poem to fixity I was trying to make of the enterprise. I had married this house with enthusiasm, and I took up the familiar role and tasks of house-wife with an energy made vigorous by commitment. "I was born to live in this house," I said to my friends in the romantic flush of love for my new home; "I intend to stay here forever."

It must be understood, for this tale to make any sense at all, that I have yearned all my adult life for permanence, for "home," for a long commitment to a place, a dwelling that would house me securely and comfortably in return for my love and attention, its walls my fortress against flux and fortune's whims. Yet every home I've had I've lived in only briefly; I've been, despite my longings, a woman forever on the move. Or, more precisely, several women, simultaneously and in succession, and all of them on the move.

In the heat of that summer, I was making another stab at it. I labored in splendid isolation toward splendid order in the arrangement of furniture, pictures on the walls, dishes in the cupboards. This finely articulated distribution of my possessions soothed me into pretending that I was indeed protected from the shifting boundaries of identity, from the fraying and unraveling that are the lot of us all.

The dissonances between my determined housekeeping and the interpolations of lazy late afternoon hours of suspended reading of *Housekeeping* did not escape me. The novel drew me away from my busy-ness to the still hours in the swaying hammock, drew me with its exquisite sentences, its

elegiac tone, its visions that all efforts to stop the flow of time, change, displacement, discomposing are fruitless. It's a vision I share, indeed advocate; the old must be abandoned in pursuit of the new. The difference is that the women in the novel act on that knowledge. I, on the other hand, sometimes at least, act as if I *don't* believe it, though I do. In the novel, Sylvie knows that something means to undo a house, so she opens the doors and windows and lets the undoer in. She underscores the silly futility of housewifely saving and storing by collecting useless things—empty cans, old newspapers—and arranging them neatly against the walls of all the rooms. Sylvie refuses the bourgeois ideologies of “home” with all their attachments to class privilege, ideologies that confine women within the predictable roles and ordered spaces of domesticity; she embraces the road rather than the cottage beside it. I try to do these things too, in my own way. But I, on the other hand, dweller in contradictions, also batten down, hunker, and hope.

II

In their essay “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?” Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty use their reading of another essay, Minnie Bruce Pratt’s “Identity: Skin Blood Heart,” to consider the political ideologies of “home”: house, family, kin, community in the immediate sense; personal identities grounded in race, class, gender, sexuality, convictions and claimed affinities in the wider sense. And while the following passage from Martin and Mohanty addresses Pratt’s remarkable essay alone, I offer it as a perspective on the possibilities of the essay in general:

[The essay] is a form of writing that not only anticipates and integrates diverse audiences or readers but also positions the narrator as reader. The perspective is multiple and shifting, and the shifts in perspective are enabled by the attempts to define self, home, and community that are at the heart of Pratt’s enterprise. The historical grounding of shifts and changes allows for an emphasis on the pleasures and terrors of interminable boundary confusions, but insists, at the same time, on our responsibility for remapping boundaries and renegotiating connections. These are partial in at least two senses of the word: politically partial, and without claims to wholeness or finality.

The essay as a performance of reading. The essayist as reader. The reader of essays as reader. All readings contingent, partial, multiple, shifting. Nothing is fixed, and nobody has a corner on truth.

When Samuel Johnson in his famous *Dictionary* defines the essay as “a loose sally of the mind; an irregular, undigested piece,” I at least suspect the privileging of reason over feeling, intellection over intuition. It is the article or treatise which earns from Johnson an implicit description as “a regular, orderly composition,” the thing the essay, by his definition, is not. What makes for the difference? The meanderings, for one thing, of the essayist’s persona, made precedent by Montaigne. A “composition” requires the writer’s subjugation to a monumental discourse. The essay is written by somebody who sallies into a subject loosely, leaving—or making holes that are not knitted up, carrying along and exploring the myriad possible specificities of the writer’s experience and identity. The essay rests on perspective, on the position of the essayist within the web of culture. It allows the essayist to say, “This is how the world looks to *me*, from my particular place in it.” The essay has, then, the potential for being at least an inroad, if not indeed an attack, on monumental discourse because as a form it negotiates the split between public discourse—formal, ordered, impersonal, knowing, with pretensions to universality and fixity, and private utterance—tentative, personal, questing, provisional. If the “composition” is an edifice, the essay is a nomad’s tent. It moves around.

The essay, then, is and has been a form open to the articulation of estrangements and contra-dictions, a place for expressing the strains, differences, rejections as well as connections experienced by those who feel or have felt particularly marginalized by the discourses which have composed the social text. I am thinking here of writers like James Baldwin, Nancy Mairs, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and many others who have recognized in the essay a potential site for the operations of contesting discourses and have used it to explore and construct in language the multiple perspectives which variant experiences and identities produce.

Virginia Woolf, for instance. Think of all those polite essays she wrote about her reading and published in the *Times Literary Supplement*. Think of how comforting, how comfortable they are, spoken from the privileged position of a woman of means, of well-placed family, of culture. And then think of others, *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*, in which she

speaks from a position as outsider, attempting to undo the cultural stories that have placed her there, on the margins, because of her gender. Such writing from the margins is “guerrilla writing,” a term I heard recently and have not been able to forget. In the terrain of monumental discourse, such pieces are eruptions of personal presence based on shifting experiences and identities, eruptions that aim to dis-compose the power relations that reside in textuality. And such moments are accomplished not only *by* particular essays within the field of more orderly forms of writing; they occur also *within* essays, as in Woolf’s “Professions for Women,” when that-which-cannot-be-said about a woman’s experience of her body slips away like a fish escaping a line. Or in “The Moment: Summer’s Night,” when an imaged scene of domestic violence—“He beats her”—intrudes upon and contrasts with the cultivated civility of the narrator and her companions. Or in “22 Hyde Park Gate,” which closes with the astonishing revelation of the sexual abuse Woolf and her sister were subjected to by their half-brother. Is Woolf in these texts violating her own dictum that the purpose of the essay is “to give pleasure”? What sort of pleasure can we get from scenes of wife-beating and forced incest and the taboos against expressing bodily experience? Perhaps the pleasures of heresy—the thing Adorno calls “the law of the innermost form of the essay.” And the pleasures of heresy are not small. Carl Klaus has aptly termed the essay an “anti-genre, a rogue form of writing in the universe of discourse.” I would elaborate only to observe that the essay can be, has been, rogue or heretical not only in form but in effect. As “antigenre,” it has the capacity to work against, even to undo, the presumptions that have structured western discourse.

Look, for another example, at what is happening in the realm of conventional academic writing. A couple of years ago, a friend gave me a copy of Jane Tompkins’ essay “Me and My Shadow” in an effort to help me out of a difficult period of inability to write. I read about Tompkins’ anger at the “straitjacket” of the suppression of the personal voice and personal experience in academic writing, about the “two voices” she felt within her, one of which had been systematically silenced. I read her plea for redressing the damage done by the conventions of intellectual discourse, a plea based on the conviction that readers “want to know about each other”:

Sometimes, when a writer introduces some personal bit of story into an essay, I can hardly contain my pleasure. I love writers who write about their own experience. I feel I'm being nourished by them, that I'm being allowed to enter into a personal relationship with them, that I can match my own experience with theirs, feel cousin to them, and say, yes, that's how it is.

Yes, I said to myself as I read, a seemingly endless stream of tears rolling down my cheeks—whether tears of grief, or joy, or both, I'm still not clear—yes, that's how it is.

Sometimes, though, the voice relating personal perspective and experience in an essay draws me, excites me, because what I read challenges rather than confirms my own experience and thus opens up for me new perspectives on the world. Then my response is not “That's how it is,” but “Is that how it is?” If I am to act in the world in a way that attempts to respect and accommodate differences, I need to know what the world is like not only for people who are in some way like me, but also for people who are in some way different. I must be taught as well as teach. Patricia Williams, a Black feminist legal scholar, begins an essay on commercial transactions by telling the story of the rape and impregnation at age twelve of her great-great-grandmother by the girl's white owner. The essay, “On Being the Object of Property,” is a dazzling poetic display which inserts the continuing personal pain of such a heritage into the affectless tradition of legal scholarship and thereby unsettles that tradition. It links Williams' meditations on her personal and racial histories, her experiences of race and gender in a hierarchical culture, with legal issues like the “Baby M” case and the forced sterilization of women of color. The essay accommodates passages like this one:

There are moments in my life when I feel as though a part of me is missing. There are days when I feel so invisible that I can't remember what day of the week it is, when I feel so manipulated that I can't remember my own name, when I feel so lost and angry that I can't speak a civil word to the people who love me best. Those are the times when I catch sight of my reflection in store windows and am surprised to see a whole person looking back. Those are the times when my skin becomes gummy as clay and my nose slides around on

my face and my eyes drip down to my chin. I have to close my eyes at such times and remember myself, draw an internal picture that is smooth and whole; when all else fails, I reach for a mirror and stare myself down until the features reassemble themselves like lost sheep.

The passage is a metaphoric description of the dis-composing effect of monolithic racist and sexist discourses on Williams, and of the composing effect of her own writing, in which she reconstructs — *re-members* — a self, however momentary, however *partial* in both senses of the word: invested with self-interest and without claim to finality. Williams' writing simultaneously composes herself and discomposes conventional discourses which in a variety of ways deny her. She makes use of the literary qualities of language, whose task, in their origins in the oral traditions of poetry, was to make memorable the stories of the tribe or culture in order to assure they would be repeated and thus not forgotten. Williams' essay is a frontal attack on the master's house, a stream of words aimed at eroding the rock of oppression at the foundation of culture. Her essay insists that there is never just one story; rather, there are many stories which can and must be told, which must be heard. In this essay Williams, like Sylvie in *Housekeeping*, is an undoer. And that cannot be a futile effort because, as James Baldwin, filled with simultaneous despair and desperate hope, writes in his beautiful essay "Nothing Personal," "For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock."

What the pedagogical implications might be of such a view of the essay I have considered here hardly at all, and then only indirectly. Certainly the form itself has been an outsider in the institution of literary studies, relegated mostly to the composition classroom where, too often, its essential qualities of perspective and personal voice have been masked or even banned. What could happen if we admit the "antigenre" not only into our polite and scholarly forms of writing, but also into the rigidly generic classrooms and hallways of our educational institutions — what Nancy Mairs calls "the ivory phallus" — I can scarcely imagine. I know I'd like to be around to watch.

III

So. What did I leave out of my story of buying a house, of my attempts to shore up its walls against some imagined ruin? Some of the reasons. I belong, by race and by family tradition, to a propertied class, where owning a house stands in direct equation with respectability. It is my toehold. Also because I am a woman who came of age in an era when “home” was woman’s sphere, even when she’s also the “head of household.” Also because I’ve been, most of my adult life, relatively rootless, following along after one man, one life plan, in flight from others. Now, my children grown and gone, I become paradoxically even more obsessive about a “nest.”

If you wonder why I of all people proved so susceptible to the seductions of “home” with all its attendant ideologies, I can tell you only and simply that I am a woman partially constructed by such ideologies.

But perhaps I’ve painted an overly romantic picture of the house and my relation to it. It’s been almost two years now, after all, since I moved in, two years of mild winters and early springs and one temperate summer. Like all love affairs, this one has lost some of its glow. The house is still grand, I admit; but water pipes burst, the roof leaks, the porches sag. The deep and dark waters of the lake at Fingerbone reach all the way to Iowa and lap at my edges. The house is after all less comfortable, less comforting than I had hoped, and other yearnings have started to surface. I manage to muster, twice a year, the thousand dollars to pay the property tax. But I feed the squirrels that eat holes in the eaves to winter over in the attic, though my more prudent friends urge me to trap them humanely and move them out into the country west of town. And I think I forgot to mention that I share the house—and not just with my cat. In fact I live only in those hardly discrete rooms of the first floor, rooms that flow liquidly one into another. In the upstairs apartment are Karen and Wayne, their black cat and their books. Wayne writes novels, Karen makes poems, so on our good days, all of us are more preoccupied with meanings than with maintenance. In the spare parking place next to the alley, a huge and ancient Buick appears several days a week beside my tenants’ Toyota. The Buick is ventilated with rusted-through holes the size of my fist. It belongs to Alex, broad-faced member of the Mesquakie tribe from the settlement over at Tama. He wears a long braid down his back, a feather in

his black felt hat; he won a dance competition, he told me, at a pow-wow on the shores of Lake Michigan just a few months ago. Karen and Wayne mentioned casually once that he was “visiting”; instead, I think he lives there with them on the days he needs to be in Iowa City to go to school. They don’t tell me that because, I suppose, they think the same impulse that led me to lay a brick terrace and plant lilies would make me exercise a white law and kick him out. But I say nothing. I’m learning to live with, live through contradictions, even learning to love them. I grow weary of defending territory to which I’m not sure I can lay just claim. And I want to be an undoer too, as well as one of the undone. I want this house to be open. Alex, when he sees me in the yard, greets me and calls me “the landlady.” The term gives me a start, especially coming from him. Whose home is this, anyway?

I know, I know, it is in some sense mine. But I can give it up. And surely someday, some way or other, I will.

NOTE

The texts cited in this essay are: T. W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” in *New German Critique*, 1984; James Baldwin, “Nothing Personal,” in *The Price of the Ticket*, 1985; Carl Klaus, “Essayists on the Essay,” in *Literary Nonfiction*, ed. Chris Anderson, 1989; Nancy Mairs, *Remembering the Bone House: An Erotics of Place and Space*, 1989; Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?” in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis, 1986; Minnie Bruce Pratt, “Identity: Skin Blood Heart,” in Bulkin, Pratt, and Smith, *Yours in Struggle*, 1984; Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 1981; Jane Tompkins, “Me and My Shadow,” in *New Literary History*, 1987; Patricia Williams, “On Being the Object of Property,” in *Signs*, 1988; Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women,” in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, 1942; Woolf, “The Moment: Summer’s Night,” in *The Moment and Other Essays*, 1948; Woolf, “22 Hyde Park Gate,” in *Moments of Being*, 1976.