

# The Nature of Today's Essay

Jiro Numano

According to Henri M. Peyre, the essay is, in modern literatures, "the category of nonfictional prose that probably ranks as the most important both in the quantity and in the quality." And "it grew into the biggest literary domain of all."<sup>1)</sup> Nevertheless, the question what an essay really is has puzzled me for years. It means several kinds of writings.

Etymologically speaking, "essay" comes from a Latin word 'exagium' meaning "a weighing" or "trial." And the word as the name of a genre of literary work comes from the French writer Michel de Montaigne of 16th century who called his writings 'essais.'

The essay is defined, by C. Hugh Holman, coauthor of a handbook to literature, as "an artistically wrought and imaginatively developed work of non-fiction, which may reveal an author's personality, express his speculations on life or events, or make a formal statement about his attitude toward a precise, objective subject."<sup>2)</sup>

## Two Kinds of Essayists

Meanwhile, speaking of English essayists, we recall Charles Lamb of 19th century, Robert Lynd of 20th and others. But the said C. Hugh Holman of the University of North Carolina reminds us of the existence of forerunners and points out that there have been two types of essayists since the earliest period. And so, let us first look at the general view of essayists from the past to the present. See diagram 1.

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1) Peyre, Henri M., "Nonfictional prose" in "The Art of Literature," in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1985, Vol. 23 Macropaedia pp. 188, 189.

2) Holman, C. Hugh, "Essay" in *Encyclopaedia Americana*, Grolier Incorporated, 1985, Vol. 10, p. 589.

INFORMAL ESSAY (隨筆) (Personal Essay, Literary Essay)	FORMAL ESSAY (評論) (Critical Essay)
Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus Theophrastus 370-287 BC (Bible) Saint Paul Marcus Aurelius 121-180 Plutarch, Thucydides, Tacitus Saint Augustine 5th century	FORERUNNERS  Plato, Aristotle Horace, Longinus Cicero, Seneca Boethius
Michel Eyquem de Montaigne 1580	BEGINNINGS 16 C  Julius Caesar Scaliger Julius Justus Thomas More, Roger Ascham Francis Bacon 1597
Joseph Hall, John Earle Ben Johnson, La Rochefoucauld William Temple	17 C  Thomas Browne John Milton John Locke, John Dryden
Cotton Mather, Alexander Pope Richard Steele, Joseph Addison Jonathan Swift, Lord Chesterfield Benjamin Franklin (US) Samuel Johnson Oliver Goldsmith	18 C PERIODICALS { Athenian Gazette The Tatler The Spectator The Guardian The Rambler } Jonathan Edwards (US)
Washinton Irving (US) Charles Lamb, Henry David Thoreau William Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt Thomas De Quincey Oliver Wendell Holmes (US) Mark Twain (US), Chales Dickens William Makepeace Thackeray George Eliot Robert Louis Stevenson (US)	19 C { Edinburgh Reviw Westminster Review Macmillan's } { North American Review (US) Harper's (US) Atlantic Monthly (US) } Walter Scott, John Wilson Thomas Carlyle Matthew Arnold William Wordsworth Samuel Taylor Coleridge Shelly Ralph Waldo Emerson (US) Edger Alan Poe (US) William Dean Howells (US)
H. L. Mencken (US) E. B. White (US) James Thurber (US) Max Beerbohm Robert Lynd J. B. Priestly W. Somerset Maugham E. V. Lucas Norman Mailer (US) Virginia Woolf D. H. Lawrence Aldus Huxley George Orwell A. A. Milne Jerome K. Jerome George Gissing	20 C { The Criterion Scrutiny Encounter } { New York Review of Books (US) Commentary (US) Harper's (US) Atlantic Monthly (US) New Yorker (US) } Paul Elmer More (US) George Santayana (US) Edmund Wilson (US) T. S. Eliot Bertrand Russell

Diagram 1

Holman, admitting the difficulty to classify the types of essays, lists two kinds of essays : informal and formal. In the informal side he suggests that Proverbs in the Bible, writings by Thucydides, Theophrastus, Plutarch, and Tacitus were the forerunners. And he names Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca and others as those who left critical essays. The form essay was started by the French writer Michel de Montaigne in the late 16th century, who called his work "essai" and meant that "his compositions were attempts or endeavours."<sup>3)</sup> Soon after Montaigne, Francis Bacon published "Essays," which could be classified as formal essays. After these two masters followed many essayists in the 17th century. Some well-known names such as John Milton, John Locke and John Dryden are found on the formal side in the chart. Then came the development of the periodicals in the late 17th and 18th centuries. The development of newspapers and magazines became an important medium for the essay and "increased its popularity, expanded its audience, and moved its appeal from an essentially aristocratic audience to the middle class."<sup>4)</sup>

The 19th century was replete with essays, both formal and informal as is evident from the chart. And on the left hand side is found the name of Charles Lamb, whose "Essays of Elia" is well known. His essays are very personal and literary and widely recognized as landmarks of the genre.

In the 20th century, essays of both types continued to be written. But informal essays only flourished in the earlier decades and its popularity declined in the later decades, losing the note of whimsy.<sup>5)</sup> Then the form, according to a handbook, didn't survive the Second World War.<sup>6)</sup> And the formal essay, too, it is said, lost some of its literary qualities.<sup>7)</sup> Thus, today, most essays are written as expository,

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3 ) *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 1985, Vol. 4, p. 562.

4 ) Holman, *op. cit.*, p. 590.

5 ) Ward, A. C., *Longman Companion to Twentieth Century Literature* (Third edition, revised by Maurice Hussey), Longman, 1981, p. 187.

6 ) *Ibid.*, p. 60.

7 ) Holman, *op. cit.*, p. 591.

informative journalism.<sup>8)</sup>

### The Differences of the Two Kinds

In the meantime, before we consider specific essays and essayists, let us briefly look at the differences of the two kinds of essays. Formal essays are tightly organized expositions, and formal or analytical treatment of impersonal subjects. They are logical in structure, serious in purpose, and critical; they examine and pass judgment on works of art or events. Emphasis is less on the author. And today, the term is often applied to expository or descriptive columns that are factual and objective, like magazine articles and reasoned opinions such as editorials.

On the other hand, informal essays are suggestive treatments of subjects, and informal in structure, personal, almost confessional in quality, graceful in style and literary in nature; they try to convey a mood and attitude, and “to persuade without argument and entertain without strain.”<sup>9)</sup> Emphasis is more on what the author thinks about a subject than the subject itself. Informal essay may take the form of a narrative, a description, an anecdote, a reflection, a dream, or a piece of whimsical extrapolation.

### “Essays of Elia” by Charles Lamb

After surveying the two types of essays, I should like to report what I have found in “Essays of Elia” by Charles Lamb, who could be regarded as a representative of literary essayist. His essays are introduced almost anywhere as among the favorite of all time, exhibiting humor, fantasy, sentiment, urbanity, and grace. In reality, it was not from my own will that I started reading Lamb’s essays, but it was exhortation of my friend, a high school English teacher, that prompted me to take up this essayist of the former century. I must admit that it was not an

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8) Rexroth, Kenneth, “The Scope of Literature” in “The Art of Literature,” in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1985, Vol. 23 Macropaedia p. 87.

9) Holman, *op. cit.*, p. 589.

easy reading, it took time to peruse, and that I often needed to refer to the careful commentary and translation to understand him. It may be that his "Essays of Elia" is one of what Somerset Maugham called "books important in the history of literature which it is now unnecessary for anybody but the student to read."<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, as I have a mind to be a student of English, I tried to read him, i. e. "Essays of Elia" and came to appreciate some of his pieces such as "The two races of men", "New Year's Eve", "A Quakers' Meeting" and a few others. I occasionally feel the tender personality of his while reading his essays.

His essay, "Dream Children", for example, is a good piece that will survive the passing of time. It reveals his sentiment toward his lover whom he didn't marry, his affection toward his elder brother and sister Mary whom he took care of, in a finely made work of fantasy. It did move me with unexpected ending. The piece reminded me of Capote's short story, "Miriam". Both are pieces of fantasy, or dream, and involves shifting and duplicating of characters, although the two pieces of work may be quite different in nature.

Now, one of the major reasons for the difficulty of reading Lamb's essays today is undoubtedly his occasional use of archaic Elizabethan style of English as well as obsolete Latin words and frequent references to and quotations from his contemporaries, and of course works of great literature such as Bible, Shakespeare, Milton and Bunyan.

But aside from this hard burden for a reader like myself, I was disappointed more often than not when his essays didn't say much on the titles under which he started his essays; it gave me the impression that the author is irresponsible and lacks seriousness. Many of his essays are verbous, look backward instead of forward. For example, in "Oxford in the Vacation", he writes "Antiquity! thou wondrous charm, what art thou? . . . What mystery lurks in this retroversion?"<sup>11</sup> And in "New Year's Eve", he confides,

"I am naturally, beforehand, shy of novelties; . . . am sanguine

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10) Maugham, W. Somerset, *Books and You*, Kinseido Ltd., 1956, p. 2.

11) Hataya, Masao, *Essays of Elia by Charles Lamb*, Kembunsha, 1929, p. 75.

only in the prospects of other (former years). . . . In a degree beneath manhood, it is my infirmity to look upon those early days. . . . That I am fond of indulging, beyond a hope of sympathy, in such retrospection, may be the symptom of some sickly idiosyncrasy. Or is it owing to another cause: simply, that being without wife or family, I have not learned to project myself enough out of my self; and having no offspring of my own to dally with, I turn back upon memory, and adopt my own early idea, as my heir and favourite?"<sup>12)</sup>

Then he reveals his limitations of the time, that is, his dislike toward the Jews and the blacks.<sup>13)</sup> His attentions tend to be directed to his inside world, namely, his brother, his sister, himself, his pastime and so forth. In other words he avoided "whatever is urgent or disturbing: politics, suffering, sex, religion."<sup>14)</sup> To sum up, his essays are not written in today's style, in terms of contents, purpose, organization, and economy. And so he treads out of the way of my sympathy, retiring under the phantom cloud of Elia.

To return to Maugham's remarks, "They (masterpieces) are important to the student, but changing times and changing tastes have robbed them of their savour and it is hard to read them now without an effort of will."<sup>15)</sup> It is no wonder that one of my colleagues, who reads English literature of past centuries, admits "Essays of Elia" are boring though the writer's tender personality betrays.

I think Lafcadio Hearn's following remarks summarise the position of Lamb as an essayist. He regards him as "a charming essayist in a light vein," who left "neither great nor strong, but pleasing and delicate" pieces with "only good small influence."<sup>16)</sup>

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12) *Ibid.*, pp. 209, 214, 222.

13) Lamb's dislike toward the Jews and the black is found in "Imperfect Sympathies" in his "Essays of Elia."

14) *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1985, Vol. 7, p. 117.

15) Maugham, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

16) Hearn, Lafcadio, *A History of English Literature*, Hokuseido Press, 1934, pp. 690, 691.

## Today's Essays

Some familiar essayists in the 19th century and Robert Lynd in the 20th century followed Lamb's tradition and many other men of letters left literary essays in the last two centuries. But now, I should like to focus on the contemporary, formal essays. By this I mean those expository and informative ones which appear on magazines and newspapers. Specifically speaking, I have in mind as specimens the "Essay" column of Time, an American weekly news-magazine, and Sydney J. Harris's column "Strictly Personal" which appeared on The Chicago Daily News and The Chicago Sun-Times for over forty years. And I understand Bertrand Russell was one of the great thinkers who left critical writings which preceded the modern type of essays.

Maugham said in 1940, "Few people have the time today to read anything but what immediately concerns them."<sup>17)</sup> So today's essays are current and deal with the most urgent subjects in the world that mean much to us here and now.

I observe that the contemporary essays consist of ① analysis of the subject matter, ② expository commentary, ③ criticism, ④ viewpoint of the writer, and ⑤ proposition or suggestion.

Viewed from the angle of their nature, first, today's essays must stand up to the expectation of up-to-date-ness, in terms of information the writer bases his argument on and his way of thinking. In today's ever changing and developing world, anything out of date won't be paid attention to. Thus, today's essay is situated at the forefront of the human society itself, and of the dynamic move of journalism and mass media. Second, writers are expected to present objective, serious and responsible treatment of the subject. And third, lengthy, wordy style is not fit for the busy world of today. A matter set forth and summarized in one page is the typical amount. But on the other hand, as the articles in most journals tend to become shorter and to strive for more immediate effect since 1940's, laments on the decline of the essay were

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17) Maugham, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

also heard.<sup>18)</sup>

### The Essay Column of the "TIME", an American Weekly Magazine

Now I turn to "Time" magazine's essay column. The column started in 1965. It gives cool-headed criticism on American civilization, politics, economy, deception in the systems, ethics, and so forth.

Topics of the column from the issues I collected since 1983 ranges from, to name a few, the U. S. Presidential election, Reagan Doctrine, affirmative action, totalitarianism, democracy, terrorism, NASA space program, AIDS, Gulf War to the collapse of U.S.S.R. and U.S.-Japan trade conflict. As for the writers, I found nearly fifty names in the past nine years, but only seven seem to be the regular contributors. Among the rest are found foreign writers such as Hungary's Nobel Prize winner, literary critic in Moscow, German poet-essayist, editor of a French magazine, former Kremlin foreign policy advisor and a journalist and novelist in Zagreb.

To give the readers an idea of the column, let me list a few interesting titles: "New But Not Necessarily Improved" which speaks of various new products; "Gravitas Factor" which compares heads of state such as Churchill, Gorbachev, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and other leaders as Mother Teresa, et al. In the latter essay Lance Morrow says these persons have gravitas factor but Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford didn't.

Occasionally, "Time" does have informal essays which could be classed with traditional literary essays. Examples of titles are "Against a Confusion of Tongues," "You Could Be Better Than You Are," and "Waiting as a Way of Life," etc. But the number is very small.

Some may question the appropriateness of applying the term "formal essay" to the columns I am examining here. While it is true that Time's essay and other reasoned opinions such as editorials are quite journalistic, we still can draw a line of demarcation between these and news articles in that the former gives the reader analysis, exposition

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18) Peyre, *op.cit.*, p. 189.



and perspective on a particular subject, and not the substance of the subject in detail.

Time's essays and even editorials express and reflect the writer's opinions and it is this perspective that the readers are often looking for. This presenting of a personal point of view is one of the essential and authentic element of an essay. In Peyre's words, the essay "should communicate an experience or depict a personality, . . . and it should make accessible to the reader knowledge and reflection and the delight of watching a fine mind at work."<sup>19)</sup> And I think the reason for usefulness of this type of essay is increasing in today's world.

Incidentally, as for the other side of the current nature of today's informative essays dealing with political and economic issues, I cannot deny that most of them are short-lived. That is, many of those pieces written a few years ago, or even half a year ago are already losing appeal. For instance, people will not be inclined to read Time's essay dealing with Geraldine Ferraro, then vice-presidential candidate when it was printed 7 years ago.

### Sydney J. Harris's Column, "Strictly Personal"

On the contrary, Sydney J. Harris's columns, as opposed to Time magazine's past essays, are still highly rewarding to read. His essays treat contemporary subjects, yet readers don't feel his pieces are out of date. He passed away in 1986. It is quite probable that part of the reason for the readability lies in the fact that what we are reading are the chosen ones from his numerous pieces. During his 42 years as a regular columnist of Chicago Daily News, he must have written essays dealing with very specific matters whose relevance faded away soon. But even from my meager reading, I can assert that his columns are different from Time's essays. His essays are more general in nature and many of his pieces still have the power to convince readers. What he did was to give readers deep insights and incisive criticism on many fundamental issues ranging from war and peace to various problems in

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19) *Ibid.*, p. 189.

human life. He is known for his intelligent and sound argument, clear logic, and warm humanism. Refined and well-balanced Judeo-Christian tradition found expression in his essays.

Several titles of his columns may give a glimpse of his essays: War Is Cancer of Mankind, Peace Isn't Just the Absence of War, We're Not Fit to Colonize Space, The Whole World Is a Huge Legacy, We Are All on One Space Ship, and Good Teachers Hard to Come By.

Having touched upon two examples of today's essays, I think at least two things are common among them. They are intelligence and perspective.

### Time's Essays on the Gulf War

Now, returning to Time magazine, it carried a dozen essays on the Gulf War from the time Iraq invaded Kuwait until Iraq was defeated in February, 1991. The tone of argument as I understand it, was for the most part critical or at least cautious of America's one-sided involvement in the conflict, as the titles suggest. And during that period, the column did play the role of today's essays by giving analysis, exposition, and perspective.

However, those essays are already becoming of the past. There will be few readers who would turn to those essays now, and few of the essays will remain worthwhile to be read again.

### Noam Chomsky on the Vietnam War

The Gulf War reminds us of the Vietnam War, although in respect of the duration of time and the results the two were quite different. And no other than a scholar of renown, whose specialty is familiar to English teachers, Noam Chomsky raised his voice against America's intervention in the Vietnam War.

After America began bombing North Vietnam in 1965, Chomsky took part in conferences, debates, forums, meetings on Vietnam, gave lectures at universities, and wrote essays on the subject for journals such as Harvard Educational Review, and New York Review of Books.

Referring to a picture of a girl holding her wounded baby sister, he asks, "How many hundreds of such pictures must we see before we begin to care and act?"<sup>20)</sup> And he calls for immediate withdrawal saying, "The daily toll in Vietnam of innocent people is so terrible that the cessation of our military activity . . . has become no longer debatable . . . but a matter of urgent and unilateral action."<sup>21)</sup> He interprets the war as "the most obscene example of a frightening phenomenon of contemporary history — the attempt by our country to impose its particular concept of order and stability throughout much of the world. By any objective standard, the United States has become the most aggressive power in the world . . ." <sup>22)</sup> Thus he saw American hegemony, or American imperial goal behind the policy.

And regarding the attitudes of intellectuals, he writes, "It is frightening to observe the comparative indifference of American intellectuals to the immediate actions of their government . . ." Changing expressions, he repeats, "As for those of us who stood by in silence and apathy as this catastrophe slowly took shape over the past dozen years, on what page of history do we find our proper place?"<sup>24)</sup>

On the one hand he is startled to see the indifference on the part of intellectuals, on the other he points out the reason behind it. He observes that "intellectuals are moving closer to the center of power, or at least being absorbed more fully into the decision-making structure"<sup>25)</sup> and "the largely humanist-oriented, occasionally ideologically minded," "free-floating intellectuals", "who sees his role largely in terms of proffering social critiques, is rapidly being displaced . . . by experts and specialists, who become involved in special governmental undertakings."<sup>26)</sup>

His essays in the book, though written more than 20 years ago, still

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20) Chomsky, Noam, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, Penguin Books, 1969, p. 12.

21) *Ibid.*, p. 178.

22) *Ibid.*, p. 316.

23) *Ibid.*, p. 249.

24) *Ibid.*, p. 257.

25) *Ibid.*, p. 26.

26) *Ibid.*, p. 28.

rapay the labor of reading. He says, "Recent history shows that it makes little difference to us what form of government a country has as long as it remains an 'open society', in our peculiar sense of thit term — a society, that is, which remains open to American economic penetration or political control."<sup>27)</sup> Does not this observation of his sound as if uttered yesterday?

### The Responsibility of Intellectuals

In the same series of essays he discusses the responsibilities of intellectuals. He cites Conor Cruise O'Brien, "increased and specific vigilance, . . . is required from the intellectual community towards specific growing dangers to its integrity."<sup>28)</sup> Chomsky says, "In the Western world at least, they (intellectuals) have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation. . . . The responsibilities of intellectuals, then, are much deeper than 'responsibility of peoples', given the unique privileges that intellectuals enjoy. . . . It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and expose lies."<sup>29)</sup>

The tone of his essays is very strong, perhaps too radical if we read them today. By nature he has a "instinctive distaste for activism,"<sup>30)</sup> but found himself edging towards an unwated crisis. I feel sympathy toward him when he says, "Traditionally the role of the intellectual, or at least his self-image, has been that of a dispassionate critic."<sup>31)</sup>

It is in line with this role that a professor of English at Brigham Young University wrote, in October, 1990, that Americans should not fight Iraq and that the proper response to the Iraqi/Kuwait contest

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27) *Ibid.*, p. 280.

28) *Ibid.*, p. 23.

29) *Ibid.*, p. 256, 257.

30) *Ibid.*, p. 291.

31) *Ibid.*, p. 251.

should be non-violent.<sup>32)</sup> Though this may seem wide of the mark in retrospect, I was pleased to note his composed judgment and courage to fulfill the intellectual's role when I saw him state the wars they waged against Viet Nam and Nicaragua were unjust wars.

## Conclusion

Being one of the humanity living today, I prefer to read expository, informative essays. But the more specific and relevant to the modern readership those essays are, the greater is the possibility of their becoming out of date soon. Maugham precisely observed, "Time has a ravaging effect on the work of our contemporaries. None can be certain that what thrills us now will thrill a generation that comes after."<sup>33)</sup> It is a great contradiction. And this is why I feel some ambivalence toward today's essays because I also know the value of literary type of essays which have universal validity in terms of both time and space.

As an essay is a means of bringing about a fundamental change in public opinion, and "the world opinion can serve as a kind of brake on utilization of the technology of destruction,"<sup>34)</sup> we, as members of intellectual community, can and should begin writing to help create an atmosphere of concern about various issues that surround us.

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32) England, Eugene, "On Trusting God, or Why We Should not Fight Iraq," *Sunstone*, Vol. 14, No. 5 (October 1990), pp. 9, 10.

33) Maugham, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

34) Chomsky, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

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