A NEW (and Very Old) APPROACH TO WRITING ESSAYS

Some Footnotes on Coleridge and Montaigne

In his book on writing called *UpTaught* Ken McCrorie quotes a piece of student’s free-writing, and I’d like to begin by sharing it with you:

In a few minutes Mom and Dad are going out to eat. She’s got on a long-sleeved yellow dress, black fish-netnylons and black heels. When she doesn’t notice Dad looks at her. Then he rests his head on the back of the chair and closes his eyes.

Last night Bob brought me home at twelve o’clock. We had been wrestling and playing tag on the grass in the back of Sangreen. We were still laughing when he let me out of the car. I pinched his buns and then he messed up my hair. We gave each other a noisy kiss under our five-watt porch light, and he left.

Mom and Dad were still up. I was relieved because I thought we might have wakened them. I started to go upstairs when Dad asked me to wait. I put my books down and sat at the desk. Mom’s face was tight and her freckles were little red spots. Dad kept puffing on his pipe. He began. “Your mother and I have decided to get a divorce. But even though I’m leaving, remember you’re still my daughter and you always will be.”

Then he started to cry. Mom was crying too. I ran over and put my arms around him. His tears felt hot on my neck. The he said, “Go to your mother. She feels bad too.”

He left tonight – to his little apartment on Copper Street. Mom helped him move, and she cried when she saw it. The bedroom is lavender with a purple bedspread. The furniture looks like Antique Barn. A big crack runs up and down the door. When he left, he took a lamp, four glasses and an ash tray.

I’ve always been struck by the telling detail in this, apparently, spontaneously-written piece. Note, for example, she doesn’t write ‘There’s a crack in the door’, but ‘A big crack runs up and down the door.’ Someone is there, following the crack with her eyes; she’s vividly, painfully present. And the end of the last sentence is quietly brilliant: ‘... he took a lamp, four glasses and an ash-tray’. These things in any other order won’t work. This is about the horrors of divorce and it has to end, as I think you’ll agree, on the image of the ash-tray. Apart from such details, the piece also shows a sophisticated and intuitive understanding of plot and time-design and they’re important for reasons I’ll come to.
You might be saying, ‘All very well, but what does this piece to do with the writing of student papers.’ On the surface, not much, but I believe if we go deeper it can tell us a good deal.

What I want to do here is to offer some alternative approaches to the writing of academic papers and, at the outset, to emphasize, as strongly as I can, that I don’t intend to promulgate the idea that student writing should be impressionistic, only loosely coherent in its argument, and thin in evidence. Nor do I believe that students’ essays should be personal yarns. On the contrary, like all teachers of writing, I’m committed to the idea that an essay should contain a sound argument backed up by relevant and clear evidence; it should be firmly structured and its conclusion should be earned by the data.

My approach here will be what I have called prismatic. I want to present a number of ideas in a somewhat non-linear mode and then attempt to draw them together at the conclusion.

*  

There’s considerable disagreement among teachers on the actual numbers – some say 20%, some say 50% and others put it as high as 80% – yet there’s nonetheless some general consensus that a great number of students face the task of writing papers with a mixture of apprehension, oppression and even dread. Perhaps you’d like to make a quick estimate from your own experience and we can compare notes. Whatever figure you arrive at the fact remains, I think, when it comes to writing papers many students, perhaps a majority, would much rather be doing something else. And that presents us with a formidable pedagogical barrier.

I have to admit that in all the years I taught at Carleton I took this fact about students’ attitudes to writing as an unalterable datum and, being a slow learner, it wasn’t until I began in retirement to re-cast a convo speech with the aim of turning it into a book that I realized what I’d always thought was a fact of nature is nothing of the kind. The apprehension, and all the other negative emotions that many students experience when they sit down to their keyboards is something that, for very demonstrable reasons, they learn.

So my first task in writing the book was, I saw it, was to help students understand that writing a paper can, and even should be an enjoyable intellectual and emotional adventure. More than that, it can be and should be a source of genuine pleasure. Now I’m not naïve enough to believe that most students can be taught to relish essay-writing as much as they do high-speed ski-ing or fast frisbee or going on their first romantic romp. The pleasure that comes from writing is more diffuse, more nuanced and less dramatic. What I am maintaining is that it is quite possible for all intelligent students to embark on a writing project with a sense of discovery, and a certain focused intent and excitement.

The very opening of my little text gives an example of both the things I’ve been talking about – dread, and pleasure so I think it might be appropriate to share it with you:
Lance Judkins sits down at his computer with a slight sense of desperation. He has to get this thing done. He begins typing:

In the cultural history of Japan, works of art have always played an important role, not just in houses and museums but also in public places. In this essay I will discuss one form of public art in Japan — the temple-garden. These gardens can be found throughout Japan. They are nothing at all like American gardens. They are also very important to the Japanese because they reveal a great deal about Japanese culture and thought. Many historians have written about the particular part that temple-gardens play in Japanese life . . .

Suddenly, he stops and lets his hands fall from the keyboard. He stares disconsolately out the window. Once again he has the old sinking feeling about his writing. There’s no voice in it and it all sounds formal and willed. He can’t understand why everything he writes comes out so deadly dull.

Lance’s assignment is to write a five-page paper for his course on Asian Religions and Culture (Religion 277). His task is to compare Japanese thought, as it’s embodied in a particular institution, with what we think of as typically western modes of thought. He’s chosen the topic of temple-gardens because he’s been interested in Japanese art and culture for a number of years and he’s recently returned from a semester in Kyoto, during which time his understanding of things Japanese, including temple-gardens, has deepened considerably.

Right now he’s recovering from a week of debilitating ’flu and the deadline’s fast approaching. He has to be efficient.

He glances at the pile of research notes on his desk. He knows that very soon after this blah opening he’ll have to state his thesis, and he doesn’t want to do that because, if this first paragraph is half–dead, stating his thesis immediately will kill his paper outright. What was, potentially, a very interesting topic is rapidly turning into a formal exercise. He can’t get away from the nagging question in his head: How can I turn all this into something coherent –AND interesting to read? It’s at this point where many students lose interest in what they are writing.

Lance leans back in his chair and looks up at the ceiling and thinks back on his time in Japan. A vivid memory floats into his mind of a sunlit day when, on an impulse, he took a detour down a side street he’d not explored before. That was a typical temple-garden, he says to himself, and I know it well. Why not start there?

He turns back to the key-board, hits DELETE and begins afresh:

A mile east from the center of Kyoto, in a modest little side-street, there’s an opening in a stone wall. If you walk by it quickly it will hardly arouse your attention. But if you stop and peer in you’ll notice something unusual. Behind the narrow opening you there’s a large flat expanse of raked gravel from which three rocks stand out like treeless mountains on the model of a desert landscape. The rocks are black and smooth and don’t seem to form part of an obvious pattern. As you look beyond the rocks you see there’s a very old building whose beams are worn and weathered. There are also some old men, who appear to be monks, sitting
quietly in the courtyard.

My curiosity was aroused a great deal by what I saw. Why such a dry, formal garden, and what was the relation between the garden and the monastery?

Lance reads over what he’s written and sits back feeling quite pleased. Although he’s not totally conscious of the nature of the sharp change he’s made he senses that it’s really significant. He’s right. Lance has discovered a special kind of transformation which, from that moment on, is going to effect everything he writes.

* 

Everyone knows that language, by its very nature, is a medium that occurs in time. The rules of grammar and syntax all affirm that. (If anyone doubts that language, by its nature, is always moving forward in time you only have to read this, or any other sentence backwards to be convinced.) What’s not so immediately apparent is that if language takes place in time it follows that every example of sustained speaking and writing is a form of narration and, given that, it becomes obvious that an essay is its own special form of narration. We could put it this way: an essay is a form of discourse which is, at base, a narrative of ideas. So that’s my first major proposition. I’ll leave it bare for now and return to it later.

* 

Montaigone, as far as I know, was the first to use the word ‘essay’ in its modern sense. He derived the word from ‘essayer’ which, as you all know, means ‘to try’. I think we could tweak the usual English translation and say that it can mean ‘to try out’, or – to extend a little - to test, or to make a foray, or to play with or explore a possibility. Clearly, this is what Montaigne did and he didn’t for a moment entertain the idea that an essay should be a directionless ramble. It had, in its own way, to be a critique.

* 

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is such a central figure in the history of modern consciousness that, by an odd kind of paradox, he’s now become almost invisible. Here’s what he said about the Imagination, and please note that when he uses that word with a capital ‘I’ he means something very different from what it conveys now - for which he reserved the term ‘Fancy’ – a mental operation of a distinctly different order. I’d like to go further into that but will resist as I want to quote Coleridge directly: Coleridge calls the Imagination

‘that esemplastic (shaping) power which, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, controul . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with the old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order. . . ‘
These ideas, as J.B. Bronowski and others have shown, are of crucial importance in all fields of learning. In fact, Northrop Frye goes further and claims that without calling on the power of the (Coleridgean) Imagination it’s impossible to do anything well - play the flute, make a decent Bouillabaisse, build a wholesome marriage, or (in Kepler’s case) discover the laws of Planetary Motion. It’s this power that makes Clifford Geertz and Levi-Strauss original anthropologists, Noam Chomsky a germinal linguist, and Srinavasan Ramanujan a great mathematician. You can name your own candidates. Many people have pointed out that the Imagination is not a rational faculty, nor is it anti-rational. It has a character and a modus operandi of its own; it is always lively and alert. It is called by various names: imp, daimon, ephebe, and in Wallace Stevens’ phrase, the ‘fonction fabulatrice’. It’s related to the traditional figure of the ‘trickster’, and it’s sometimes called the muse. It’s a power we find almost everywhere in Shakespeare, somewhat less frequently in Milton, and in some novelists, particularly C.P. Snow, there is almost no evidence of it at all. But when we see it we recognize it immediately:

_The honey of heaven may or may not come_
_But that of earth both comes and goes at once_. (Wallace Stevens)

Or here’s another example, whose source I can’t track down:

_Good stories only happen to people who can tell them_.

Such beguiling _trouvailles_ are not arrived at by logic and reasoning. They live in a different dimension, and they come into the houses of our mind, unexpectedly, as treasured guests.

It might be best to say that the Imagination _uses_ the rational faculties but is not subsumed under them. Admittedly, all the evidence one gathers and applies with careful logic to support a proposition in a paper should be rationally presented. But the rational faculty does not _discover_ anything by itself. In a dump Picasso finds an old bicycle seat and a pair of handlebars; playfully, he puts them together and ‘finds’ a very lively bull’s head. Cezanne discovers that a landscape, with its trees rocks and houses, can be vividly evoked on canvas by transforming the natural details into quasi-geometric forms. Jim Watson and Bernard Crick didn’t arrive at the form for the DNA molecule simply by using their reasoning powers. They needed to _imagine_ the form of the double helix before they could find it. Nor was Clifford Geertz totally reliant on reason in his essay _Deep Play_ (please note those words): _Notes on the Balinese Cockfight_. In that essay Geertz discovers, with the aid of some bizarre ‘accidents’, that the illegal practice of cockfighting is a very revealing metaphor for some central values of Balinese culture. The germinal insight was something he twigged, then reasoned through as he wrote and thought and wrote and thought.
To go back: my basic contention is a simple one, and it’s double-pronged. When students feel apprehension or other negative emotions as they set out to write their essays this psychological or emotional reaction is directly related to the rhetorical structure they have been told is mandatory and invariable. The psychological and the formal, are deeply intertwined in that they very often form a negative feedback loop. That was what Lance was caught in when first he sat down at the keyboard.

My own discovery about students’ writing— which is nothing at all new, though it might seem so in our present situation – was to see that if we could help the students find an approach which was grounded initially in his or her authentic experience we could make some progress. This is what Lance did in his second draft, after which he had no trouble at all getting started. He found his voice. That in turn, brought him up against a new problem, and this is where it gets really interesting. If an essay, as I’m arguing, is a narrative of ideas, the over-arching, problem becomes this: if I want to go beyond the received model, which is really based on the idea that writing takes place in space not in time, what shape will my essay take as a whole? The problem is not nearly as obdurate as it seems.

Some teachers, myself included, when asked about possible variants on the usual form, have often replied ‘Be creative’. As Liz Ciner pointed out to me years ago when we were working on the very early drafts of this book, this is about as useful as saying to plain Jack or Jane when they’re worried about their appearance ‘Be Beautiful’. That brings me to what for many might be the most problematic assertion that I’ll make in these remarks. Again, I’ll give it bare in the hope that it will sharpen the debate. It can be stated like this: *each good essay is a living organism; it has its own individual hidden form, and that form is discovered, at least in part, in the actual process of writing.*

I believe this assertion is substantiated time and again in the essays of Montaigne, D.H. Lawrence, Stephen Jay Gould, PWB Medawar, G.B. White - not to mention ancient writers such as Plato, and a host of others both new and old. That’s all well and good, you might be saying, but even if it’s true most students will be completely lost if they try something too ambitious too quickly. I agree. One thing that experience has taught me is that even those students who very much want to try something new in their essay writing are, for a variety of reasons, extremely apprehensive about departing form the old model. With all that in mind I’ve devised a kind a weaning model using some of the characteristics of the five-para model but arranged in a somewhat different way to provide a narrative structure, in the sense I’ve been using that term. This all-purpose model has the happy acronym **ILIAD** (we remember that Homer was the greatest writer of narratives in our tradition). Here’s an outline of its structure:

I : Introduction

For students who find it very difficult to get started one way is to follow the example of Lance and find something in your own personal experience which leads in, perhaps rather indirectly, to your chosen topic. It might be a personal memory, a remark heard on class, a passage in a book, almost anything – it’s only requirements are that it must have
awakened your curiosity and it must be, however marginally related to your topic. I have to add here that your initial opening is not cast in stone. It’s purpose is to get you going and, like anything else in your rough draft can be radically revised or even jettisoned in later drafts. Purpose now is to get you going.

**L: Link**

You then proceed to show how this incident, event, example – or whatever it was that struck you – leads naturally to what you want to explore in your essay;

**I: Intention and Foreshadowing of your thesis**

In this stage you introduce your reader to your central consideration and give a foreshadowing of your conclusion, without stating it in full. This stage is challenging at first because most students are taught to dump their full conclusion/thesis very early in their essay. But if you’re going to make your essay an interesting narrative of ideas it’s necessary not to do that because from that point on the essay becomes anti-climactic. Students know that instinctively (again see Lance on Temple-Gardens) and this new stage will get them to be inventive and think differently about how to unfold their argument.

**A: Advancing the Argument**

This is the stage where you mount your evidence with as many supporting arguments as you need (there is nothing holy about the number 3) and when you have done that it leadse naturally to the final stage:

**D: Deduction**

This is what we usually call the Conclusion/Thesis. (I needed a D-word for the acronym!)

The ILIAD model can be used at any time a student is stuck and wants to make a departure from the received model, and at the same time not try anything wildly ambitious. It’s a stage, as are all the other alternatives, which can help people find their own style and voice.

The four alternatives that follow are somewhat more ambitious and, proceeding from simpler to more complex, here’s an outline: XXXXX

**a) The False Thesis**

Paradoxically, this is one form in which you begin by using the five-para model but from a very different purpose. Sometimes when a particular interpretation or theory is widely held but, in the view of the writer, is nonetheless erroneous, it can be a useful strategy to begin arguing as if the commonly held assumption were true. The example used concerns a poem of Robert Frost in which the author shows that, XXXXX the evidence of the poem itself, the received interpretation won’t hold up, and then goes on to show how the words in the poem support a very different interpretation.

**b) Approaching Sideways**
Sometimes, without any forcing we see a connection between two fields of knowledge that are not normally made. In this case the connection is between a poem and the game of football as an ‘indicator’ of American cultural values. The poem, for a number of reasons, has interested her since her high-school days, and she has always been, for a complex of reasons, fascinated by the game. The connection in this case provides the writer a useful, though obviously limited lead-in to the complexities of her topic.

**c) Dialectics**

The nature of magnetism, certain aspects of quantum Mechanics, the relation between consciousness and the brain – to name just a few - have been and still are so difficult that it’s impossible to come to a conclusion about them. In these cases, and many more, one strategy is to construct a paper as an unfolding dialectic in which opposing views and voices are allowed full play. In the example I’ve used the topic is the relationship between Fiction and History and the author does her best to state the nature of the question and not come to a firm conclusion because to do so would be, for her, intellectually dishonest. All she can do is to point at this stage of her understanding is to point to some possibilities which she believes is a contribution to the discussion as it now stands.

**d) Prismatic Composition**

This method mimics an essential operation of the human intellect when faced with a tough challenge. In this case the question is the ‘true’ meaning of Tom Stoppard’s play “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead” are so very puzzling that all a perceptive critic can do is move around the topic and make probes that may or may not reveal a possible meaning. We ‘play’ with possibilities, we consider the topic from various angles, we try to find a way to release the powers of the Imagination (in Coleridge’s sense).

I’ve outlined three sub-species of prismatic composition. The first is where no rounded conclusion seems possible; the second comes to a very tentative conclusion and the third posits a somewhat firmer resolution which approaches the nature of a theses statement.

All these five alternatives possibilities for the usual model, it must be emphasized, are only possibilities. Part of the fun for later stages in writing is inventing one’s own forms. And here one must also mention the possibility of Mixed Forms, in which some of the strategies in the five forms outlined here are gathered into a larger whole.

*It’s time to draw things together together.*

The new psychological and rhetorical approach I’ve outlined is based on a number of assumptions which I believe are borne out in practice:
Most students, given the right cues, can find the task of writing an essay, considerably more enjoyable than they often do;

The most effective way of doing this is to begin with an authentic personal experience connected with the substance of the essay. Most students find it rewarding to begin by practicing the kind of free-writing I quoted at the outset about the young woman whose parents were getting divorced. This practice accustoms them to the idea that writing can be fun, and it can help us make discoveries. (It’s sometimes useful to remember two pieces of wisdom from the pen of W.H. Auden, the first is an aphorism whose force all of us have felt: *Words are not the hand-maiden of ideas, but the mother of ideas*. The second is his famous question: *How can I know what I think before I see what I say?*) Once comfortable with the physical act of writing (some will take a lot of time to get there) one can then encourage students to follow Lance’s strategy of intuitively connecting something in his or her own experience with the topic in hand. It doesn’t matter, in these preliminary stages, if false leads are followed. They can be excised, or edited later. What really matters is that, especially in the early drafts, we keep writing.

It took some time for Lance to discover his essay is concerned with trying to reconcile (to use Coleridge’s word) two apparent opposites: temple-gardens live in an autochthonous zone (they are, so to speak, ‘out of time’), yet they do have a history and that history has gone through a number of stages, which not only mark them off from the history of formal gardens in the West, but accompany, *pari passu*, a number of changes in spiritual and cultural phases in the history of Japanese culture as a whole. That, somewhat expanded, will be his thesis, but it will come at the end, and he will have earned it by the evidence he provides.

Lance has already sensed intuitively that all good writing can only spring from a thorough involvement in our explorations and, as a corollary, no matter what form he imposes on his material little good will of it come if he does not remain involved in heart, mind and spirit.

Finally, Lance discovered all on his own, that as an essay is a narrative of ideas, he ought to find an engaging place for both himself and his reader to start, to keep his reader interested throughout and to withhold his full conclusion – whether it’s a thesis statement or a question – until the end where, as in all good narratives, it belongs.

*I want to end with a personal anecdote that sprang from the time when I first, rather tentatively, introduced this new (and time-tested) approach to a very bright group of students here at Carleton. At the end of that course one of the students approached me and said: *After this class I find I can write much more freely, and much more enjoyably, I’ve gained knowledge of some new and very useful approaches to essay-form, and I’ve lost most of my apprehension about writing papers - and last, you’ve given me something very interesting to think about.* At this point I found myself glowing with a certain*
amount of pedagogical pride. But then, after a pause, the student astounded me with this. ‘And I have to tell you that what you’ve taught us is all absolutely useless.’

You can understand my sense of deflation. Very puzzled, I asked him why that was so, and this is what he said: When I go into my next class with Professor X (naming a teacher who is no longer at Carleton) he will tell me very firmly to forget all about that Creative Stuff and get busy and write an essay in the form he’s instructed me too. If you don’t, he will say, there’s no chance that I’ll get a good grade - not from me anyway.’

I really regret that that colleague won’t be able to engage me in a discussion on the matters I’ve raised here and I hope, in his lieu, that some of you will. I also ask that at suit of my gray beard and, approaching the middle of my ninth decade – and, some say, just this side of my anecdote - you’ll make allowances for my proposing what may appear to be an unacceptable departure from academic practice. I’ve been convinced for years that ‘reculer pour mieux sauter’ can be a very useful strategy. Whether or no, I really hope we can begin debating all this as soon as possible, not posthumously. If what I’ve said here proves useful in such a debate I’ll be more than pleased.

Keith Harrison
Emeritus Professor of English &
Writer-in-residence

BIO NOTE (should one be needed)
Keith Harrison’s most recent publication is **HOW TO STOP YOUR PAPERS FROM KILLING YOU (And Me)** which is presently being used as a text in the Writing Program at the University of Minnesota. He was for almost 30 years a member of Carleton’s English Department where he was Writer-in-Residence and sometime editor of **The Carleton Miscellany**. His essays, mainly but not only, on literary matters, have appeared in a wide variety of publications in England, America and Australia. He is also the author of a dozen collections of poetry and translation, including **CHANGES** (Collected Poems 1962-2002, and a verse translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (O.U.P. World’s Classics). Several of his poems have recently (2014) been chosen for representation in two Australian national anthologies.
The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.58

4) What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the
other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts and emotions of the poet's own mind. The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses by that synthetic and magical power...the imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding...reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.

Doubtless this could not be, but that she turns
Bodies to spirit by sublimation strange,
As fire converts to fire the things it burns,
As we our food into our nature change.
From their gross matter she abstracts their forms,
And draws a kind of quintessence from things;
Which to her proper nature she transforms
To bear them light on her celestial wings.

Thus does she, when from individual states
She doth abstract the universal kinds;
Which then re-clothed in divers names and fates
Steal access through our senses to our minds.

(SIR JOHN DAVIES ON THE SOUL)

T. S. ELIOT

Sir John Davies

Chief Justice John Davies died on December 7, 1626. He left a number of poems, a philosophical treatise, “Reason’s Academy,” some legal writings, and several long State Papers on Ireland. As a public servant he had a distinguished career; but
very likely the poem which has preserved his memory, *Nosce Teipsum*, was what commended him to King James. Possibly James was more appreciative of learning than of poetical merit; but, in any case, he recognized merit in a poet who was, in some respects, as out of place in his own age as he is in ours.

Davies’s shorter poems are usually graceful and occasionally lovely, but they are so completely eclipsed even by the modest reputation of *Nosce Teipsum* and *Orchestra* that they are never chosen as anthology pieces. *Nosce Teipsum*, by its gnomic utterance and its self-contained quatrains, lends itself to mutilation; but a stanza or two is all that has been anthologized. Probably all that most readers know of Davies is represented by the two stanzas in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*:

I know my soul hath power to know all things,
Yet she is blind and ignorant in all:
I know I’m one of Nature’s little kings,
Yet to the least and vilest things am thrall.


I know my life’s a pain and but a span;
I know my sense is mock’d in everything;
And, to conclude, I know myself a Man—
Which is a proud and yet a wretched thing.

Fine and complete as the two stanzas are they do not represent the poem, and no selection of stanzas can represent it. Davies is a poet of fine lines, but he is more than that. He is not one of that second rank of poets who, here and there, echo the notes of the great. If there is, in *Orchestra*, a hint of the influence of Spenser, it is no more than the debt which many Elizabethans owe to that master of versification. And the plan, the versification, and the content of *Nosce Teipsum* are, in that age, highly original.

The poem of *Nosce Teipsum* is a long discussion in verse of the nature of the soul and its relation to the body. Davies’s theories are not those of the later seventeenth-century philosopher, nor are they very good Aristotelianism. Davies is more concerned to prove that the soul is distinct from the body than to explain how such distinct entities can be united. The soul is a spirit, and, as such, has wit, will, reason and judgment. It does not appear as the “form” of the body, and the word “form” appears in the poem rather in the sense of “representation” [*similitudo*]. The soul is in the body as light is in the air—which disposes of the scholastic question whether the soul is more in one part of the body than another. Nor are the problems of sense perception difficult to resolve: Davies is not troubled by the “reception of forms without matter.” His contribution to the science of acoustics is the explanation that sounds must pass through the “turns and windings” of the ear:

> For should the voice directly strike the braine,  
> It would astonish and confuse it much.

Whether or not Davies borrowed his theories—if they deserve the name of theories—from Nemesius or from some other Early Christian author, and whether he got them direct or secondhand,
it is evident that we cannot take them very seriously. But the end of the sixteenth century was not a period of philosophic refinement in England—where, indeed, philosophy had visibly languished for a hundred years and more. Considering the place and the time, this philosophical poem by an eminent jurist is by no means a despicable production. In an age when philosophy, apart from theology, meant usually (and es-

pecially in verse) a collection of Senecan commonplaces, Davies’s is an independent mind. The merit and curiosity of the poem, however, reside in the perfection of the instrument to the end. In a language of remarkable clarity and austerity Davies succeeds in maintaining the poem consistently on the level of poetry; he never flies to hyperbole or bombast, and he never descends, as he easily might, to the pedestrian and ludicrous. Certain odd lines and quatrains remain in the memory, as:

But sith our life so fast away doth slide,
As doth a hungry eagle through the wind,
(a simile which Alexander borrows for his *Julius Caesar*), or

And if thou, like a child, didst feare before,
Being in the darke, where thou didst nothing see;
Now I have brought thee torch-light, fear no more;
Now when thou diest, thou canst not hud-winkt be.

Davies has not had the credit for great felicity of phrase, but it may be observed that, when other poets have pilfered from him or have arrived independently at the same figure, it is usually Davies who has the best of it. Grosart compares the following two passages showing a simile used by Davies and by Pope:
Much like a subtil spider, which doth sit
In middle of her web, which spreadeth wide;
If aught do touch the utmost thread of it,
She feels it instantly on every side.

Pope:
The spider’s touch, how exquisitely fine,
Feels at each thread, and lives along the line.

Davies’s spider is the more alive, though he needs two more lines for her. Another instance is the well-known figure from the *Ancient Mariner*:

Still as a slave before his lord,
    The ocean hath no blast;
His great bright eye most silently
    Up to the Moon is cast—
where “most” is a blemish. Davies has (in *Orchestra*):

324
For be the Sea that fleets about the Land,
    And like a girdle clips her solide waist,
Musicke and measure both doth understand;
    For his great chrystall eye is always cast
Up to the Moone, and on her fixèd fast;
    And as she daunceth in her pallid sphere
So daunceth he about his center heere.

But the mastery of workmanship of *Nosce Teipsum* and its beauty are not to be appreciated by means of scattered quotations. Its effect is cumulative. Davies chose a difficult stanza, one in which it is almost impossible to avoid monotony. He embellishes it with none of the flowers of conceit of his own age or the next, and he has none of the antitheses or verbal wit with which the Augustans sustain their periods. His vocabulary
is clear, choice and precise. His thought is, for an Elizabethan poet, amazingly coherent; there is nothing that is irrelevant to his main argument, no excursions or flights. And, although every quatrain is complete in itself, the sequence is never a “string of pearls” (such as was fashionable in the next age, as in Crashaw’s Weeper); the thought is continuous. Yet no stanza ever is identical in rhythm with another. The style appears plain, even bald, yet Davies’s personal cadence is always there. Many critics have remarked the condensation of thought, the economy of language, and the consistency of excellence; but some have fallen into the error of supposing that Davies’s merit is of prose. Hallam, after praising the poem, says:

“If it reaches the heart of all, it is through the reason. But since strong argument in terse and correct style fails not to give us pleasure in prose, it seems strange that it should lose its effect when it gains the aid of regular metre to gratify the ear and assist the memory.”

Hallam’s criticism is topsy-turvy. Hallam’s heart must have been peculiarly inaccessible, or his reason very easily touched. The argument is not strong; had Davies entered the ring of philosophical argument his contemporary, Cardinal Bellarmine, could have knocked him out in the first round. Davies had not a philosophical mind; he was primarily a poet, but with a gift for philosophical exposition. His appeal is, indeed, to what Hallam calls the heart, though we no longer employ that single organ as the vehicle of all poetic feeling. The excellence of the theory of body and soul which Davies expounded is, however, irrelevant. If someone had provided him with a better theory the poem might have been, in one aspect, a better one;
in another aspect it does not matter a fig. The wonder is that Davies, in his place and time, could produce so coherent and respectable’ a theory as he did. No one, not even Gray, has surpassed Davies in the use of the quatrain which he employed for *Nosce Teipsum*; and no poem in any similar metre (compare The Witch of Atlas) is metrically superior to *Orchestra*. Even his little acrostic poems on the name of Queen Elizabeth are admirable in grace and melody. And with this genius for versification, with a taste in language remarkably pure for his age, Davies had that strange gift, so rarely bestowed, for turning thought into feeling.

In the effort to “place” Davies, who appears anomalous, critics have compared him on the one hand to the Senecals, to Chapman and Daniel and Greville, and on the other hand to Donne and the metaphysicals. Neither classification is quite exact. Davies’ only direct debt as a poet seems to be to Spenser, the master of everybody. The type of his thought, and consequently the tone of his expression, separates him from the Senecals. His thought, as we have said, is inferior as philosophy, but it is coherent and free from eccentricity or pose. He thinks like a scholastic, though the quality of his thought would have shocked a scholastic. Chapman, Daniel and Greville, so far as they can be said to have thought at all, thought like Latin rhetoricians. Like the other dramatists, they imbibed from Seneca a philosophy which is essentially a theatrical pose. Hence their language, even when pure and restrained—and Daniel’s is astonishingly pure and restrained—is always orotund and oratorical; their verse is as if spoken in public, and their feelings as if felt in public. Davies’s is the language and the tone of solitary meditation; he speaks like a man reasoning with himself in solitude, and he never raises his voice.

In the same way Davies may be said to have little in common
with Donne. It is not merely Davies’s restraint in the use of simile and metaphor. The verbal conceit, as used by Donne, implies a very different attitude towards ideas from that of Davies, perhaps a much more conscious one. Donne was ready to entertain almost any idea, to play with it, to follow it out of curiosity, to explore all its possibilities of affecting his sensibility. Davies is much more mediaeval; his capacity for belief is greater. He has but the one idea, which he pursues in all seriousness—a kind of seriousness rare in his age. Thought is not exploited for the sake of feeling, it is pursued for its own sake; and the feeling is a kind of by-product, though a by-product worth far more than the thought. The effect of the sequence of the poem is not to diversify or embellish the feeling: it is wholly to intensify. The variation is in the metrics. There is only one parallel to Nosce Teipsum, and, though it is a daring one, it is not unfair to Davies. It is the several passages of exposition of the nature of the soul which occur in the middle of the Purgatorio. To compare Davies with Dante may appear fantastic. But, after all, very few people read these parts of Dante, and fewer still get any pleasure out of them: in short, these passages are probably as little read or enjoyed as Nosce Teipsum itself. Of course they are vastly finer, for two quite different reasons—Dante was a vastly greater poet, and the philosophy which he expounds is infinitely more substantial and subtle:
Esce di mano a lui, che la vagheggia
prima che sia, a guisa di fanciulla
che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia,
l’anima semplicetta, che sa nulla,
salvo che, mossa da lieto fattore,
volentier torna a ciò che la trastulla.

Di picciol hene in pria sente sapore;
quivi s’inganna, e retro ad esso corre,
se guida o fren non torce suo amore.

From his hands who fondly loves her ere she is in being, there issues, after the fashion of a little child that sports, now weeping, now laughing,
the simple, tender soul, who knoweth naught save that, sprung from a joyous maker, willingly she turneth to that which delights her.

First she tastes the savour of a trifling good; there she is beguiled and runneth after it, if guide or curb turn not her love aside.

It is not in any way to put Davies on a level with Dante to say that anyone who can appreciate the beauty of such lines as these should be able to extract considerable pleasure from Nosce Teipsum.

Michel de Montaigne > Quotes
Michel de Montaigne quotes (showing 1-30 of 262)

“The most certain sign of wisdom is cheerfulness.”
— Michel de Montaigne
2029 likes

“On the highest throne in the world, we still sit only on our own bottom.”
— Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Essays
tags: humility, throne
1417 likes

“The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself.”
— Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Essays
663 likes

“I do not care so much what I am to others as I care what I am to myself.”
— Michel de Montaigne
tags: confidence, inspirational, pride
635 likes

“I quote others only in order the better to express myself.”
— Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Essays
tags: expression, humor, irony, quote, truth
525 likes
“When I am attacked by gloomy thoughts, nothing helps me so much as running to my books. They quickly absorb me and banish the clouds from my mind.”
— Michel de Montaigne, Les Essais

tags: books
334 likes

“If I speak of myself in different ways, that is because I look at myself in different ways.”
— Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Essays

tags: individuality, reflection
199 likes

“Learned we may be with another man's learning: we can only be wise with wisdom of our own.”
— Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Essays

tags: learning, philosophy, wisdom
171 likes

“He who fears he shall suffer, already suffers what he fears.”
— Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Essays

tags: fear, paradox, suffer, suffering
170 likes

“If you press me to say why I loved him, I can say no more than because he was he, and I was I.”
— Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Essays

tags: love
155 likes
“Nothing is so firmly believed as that which we least know.”
— Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*
tags: belief, firm, ignorance, intensity, knowledge
107 likes

“Man is certainly stark mad; he cannot make a worm, and yet he will be making gods by dozens.”
— Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*
tags: gods, humor, madness, superstition
105 likes

“I find I am much prouder of the victory I obtain over myself, when, in the very ardor of dispute, I make myself submit to my adversary’s force of reason, than I am pleased with the victory I obtain over him through his weakness.”
— Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*
tags: adversary, ardor, argument, changed-mind, dispute, force, open-mind, pleasure, pride, reason, victory, weakness
93 likes

“I prefer the company of peasants because they have not been educated sufficiently to reason incorrectly.”
— Michel de Montaigne
tags: reason-education
87 likes

“Lend yourself to others, but give yourself to yourself.”
— Michel de Montaigne
“Obsession is the wellspring of genius and madness.”
— Michel de Montaigne

“To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books, and to win, not battles and provinces, but order and tranquility in our conduct. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately. All other things, ruling, hoarding, building, are only little appendages and props, at most.”
— Michel de Montaigne

tags: character-development

“Confidence in others' honesty is no light testimony of one's own integrity.”
— Michel de Montaigne

tags: confidence, faith, honesty, integrity

“I speak the truth, not so much as I would, but as much as I dare; and I dare a little more as I grow older.”
— Michel de Montaigne

“My art and profession is to live.”
— Michel de Montaigne

“Let us give Nature a chance; she knows her business better than we do.”
— Michel de Montaigne, *Montaigne: Essays*

tags: nature

61 likes

“Let us give Nature a chance; she knows her business better than we do.”
— Michel de Montaigne, *Montaigne: Essays*

tags: nature

61 likes

“Let us give Nature a chance; she knows her business better than we do.”
— Michel de Montaigne, *Montaigne: Essays*

tags: nature

61 likes

“To begin depriving death of its greatest advantage over us, let us adopt a way clean contrary to that common one; let us deprive death of its strangeness, let us frequent it, let us get used to it; let us have nothing more often in mind than death... We do not know where death awaits us: so let us wait for it everywhere.”

"To begin depriving death of its greatest advantage over us, let us adopt a way clean contrary to that common one; let us deprive death of its strangeness, let us frequent it, let us get used to it; let us have nothing more often in mind than death... We do not know where death awaits us: so let us wait for it everywhere.”
— Michel de Montaigne

60 likes

“Let us give Nature a chance; she knows her business better than we do.”
— Michel de Montaigne

60 likes

“To begin depriving death of its greatest advantage over us, let us adopt a way clean contrary to that common one; let us deprive death of its strangeness, let us frequent it, let us get used to it; let us have nothing more often in mind than death... We do not know where death awaits us: so let us wait for it everywhere.”
— Michel de Montaigne

60 likes

“The greater part of the world's troubles are due to questions of grammar.”
— Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*

tags: de-montaigne, grammar, humor, misunderstandings, problems, troubles, world

58 likes

“The greater part of the world's troubles are due to questions of grammar.”
— Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*

tags: de-montaigne, grammar, humor, misunderstandings, problems, troubles, world

58 likes

“The greater part of the world's troubles are due to questions of grammar.”
— Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*

tags: de-montaigne, grammar, humor, misunderstandings, problems, troubles, world

58 likes

“If there is such a thing as a good marriage, it is because it resembles friendship rather than love.”
— Michel de Montaigne