ESSAY TOPOGRAPHY

Imagine the essay as an artifact of the topography in a landscape. Wander through and discover it, a found object, like a stone or a pine cone or an antler. The words might look like markings on a beech tree. Read it and find your way to the place or the thing it describes. Hold it like a map and trace the texture underfoot. It has perspective and color unique to the writer. If the essay is beautifully formed it will take you in and out of yourself like a sailboat tacking up wind or a switchbacking trail or a meandering river. The essay eases you through the terrain. There are ascents and descents, trials that will test your imagination.

1

> Artifact: [Latin. *factum.* to make] something that appears
> to exist because of the way a thing, data, or the like is examined,
> for example, a biological specimen that is not present naturally
> but has been introduced or produced during a procedure.

Composing is a procedure, an examination of traits of facts of this or that—a mountain ridge, a pool of water, a stick—and the unique thoughts that encase them in a bundle. The essay is produced like larvae or a pearl. Facts become artifacts when they are artfully restructured in a unique product: the essay. The essay is a literary distortion, a byproduct of reassembly, changed by observation and trickled through thought like deposition. The reader recovers the essay as artifact and imagines, experiences the fact. The cut sunflower opens like a hand above the lip red petals of a rose; green stems extend in prisms of a clear glass vase. Can you see it? Here, an assemblage of facts produces an artifact fragment.

What are some of the traits of facts and how are these composed? The answers originate in Aristotle's Rhetoric. "Rhetoric," he writes, "[is] the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion […] on almost any subject presented to us" (25). The essay most certainly is a means of persuasion because it involves three of Aristotle's modes: First that "the speaker's personal character make[s] us think him credible"; second that "the hearers [are persuaded] when the speech stirs their emotions; third that "persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth" (25). Aristotle rightly proposed that a composition must depict character and is, "the indication of moral purpose [that] the quality of purpose indicated determines the quality of character depicted and is itself determined by the end pursued" (209). A credible character and hence a credible composition is proven by "establishing the justice or injustice of some action" (67) which is established by Aristotle's third mode of complete proofs: irrefutable arguments. Credible character is demonstrated by reasoning logically. Logical reasoning is displayed by irrefutable proofs. Objective reality (objects, concretes) must correspond with the propositions of a statement to be infallible. "The fact that he is getting divorced is evidence that he was married." This statement applies the particular to the universal case, so it is a complete proof. Some statements about objects are "probable" and some are "signs" of the first type, the second type applies the universal to the particular and is refutable.

Complete proofs are the best kinds of statement in essays since they give the reader a reason to identify with and be persuaded by the artful arrangement of traits of facts. It is not enough to prove, through such reasoning, that a statement about a fact in the world is true. The composer must also help the reader identify by linking the emotions to reason and character. Aristotle writes that the composer must "understand the emotions […] to name and describe them, to know their causes and the ways in which they are excited" (25).

The composer's appeal to the emotions of the reader requires more than the rhetoric of irrefutable argument or right character; it requires poetic persuasion. Herein is the answer to the origin, indeed the necessity, for a field of study called Literary Nonfiction. Poetics correspond to the layer of rhetoric that corresponds to the layer of emotions in the reader. Persuasion is only effected by one or more of the three means; the essay invokes all three at the same time. The essay is a construction in three strata: hero, topography, artifact. These correspond to Aristotle's character, emotions, proofs. The (composer) hero passes through topography on the way to the artifact in a kind of diving action; the reader experiences this process in reverse. This is the action that synthesizes the traits of both the composer and the facts to form a plot.

Aristotle writes "It was naturally the poets who first set the movement going; for their words represent things […] it was because poets seemed to win fame through their fine language when their thoughts were simple […] that the language of oratorical prose at first took a poetical color […] this aptness of language is one thing that makes people believe in the truth of your story" (165). This movement was a kind of literary trend that occurred when lawyers and politicians adopted styles of the common language of entertainers in order to create the polis that would speak to the people. Its application to nonfictional information is undoubtedly the original method of structure, style, and syntax. The essay itself, minus the imposition of fable, is the highest form of Literary Nonfiction because it deals with immediate reality. The movement in this case is a noun as well as a verb: the essayist moves between the two types of rhetoric, in the passage through emotions and topographies, adapting character to proofs, composer to artifact.

That this should be the highest form is succinctly shown in Aristotle's statement "the truth is shown by experience: though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art […] the reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time learning—gathering the meaning of things" (226). He cautions the poet "to put the actual scenes as far as possible before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the vividness of an eye-witness […] he will devise what is appropriate, and be least likely to overlook incongruities" (245). An artifact with incongruities is one that has "too much art"; the rhetoric of the object, the traits of the facts, must be examined initially without the scrim of emotions or artistic embellishment. Incongruities are excised in the artifact if the composer has applied the propositions of rhetoric in the essay: complete proofs.

Aristotle calls the poet "an imitator just like the painter or other maker of likenesses, he must necessarily in all instances represent things in one of other of the three aspects, either as they were or are, or as they are said or thought or be or to have been, or as they ought to be. All this he does in language, with an admixture […] of strange words and metaphors […] modified forms of words […] conceded in poetry. There is […] of poetry itself a possibility of two kinds of error, the one directly, the other only accidentally connected with the art. If the poet meant to describe the thing correctly, and failed through lack of power of expression, his art itself is at fault. But if it was through his having meant to describe it in some incorrect way (e.g. to make the horse in movement have both right legs thrown forward) that technical error […] or impossibilities of whatever kind they may be, have got into his description, his error in that case is not in the essentials of the poetic art

[…] Any impossibilities […] are faults (260). These faults are faults of reasoning and by extension, character defects of the composer—a hero with a tragic flaw—unless, of course, the composer is writing fiction.

Aristotle's theory brings to mind John Shook's technological theory from his article "A Pragmatically Realistic Philosophy of Science" in which he says "a theory's purpose is to direct the application of technology toward producing its object where it had not existed before" (340). In this sense it is 'production' of matter to fit the model (theory = model = production = reality) to test accuracy of a theory. For the LNF practitioner it would be 'reproduction' of matter to fit the product (reality = model = product). In order to accurately reproduce matter in the second sense it is necessary to know what 'observation' means. Using the example of particle physics, Shook points out that computers must sort through millions of measured events to find one infallible observation of a particle (342). But, he says, one infallible piece of data that counts as an observation cannot be construed as "epistemological certainty" (342). Observation must also include the technological means used to manipulate the data and the concept that the observer is a 'selector' of that data. Since the purpose of a theory in the first sense is to model reality in the absence of observation, and the theorist wishes to produce the desired outcome, it becomes plain that theorists reproduce their own evidence. For the LNF writer, of course, the evidence is already there. The practice of observation would imply that the LNF practitioner is also a selector and the test for accuracy would to be to reliably and consistently reproduce the results, backwards and forwards, that the reader expects to find in nature.

Michel de Montaigne has a lot to say about the essay form that fits with the concept of artifact. He writes "I would like everyone to write what he knows, and as much as he knows […] for a man may have some special knowledge and experience of the nature of a river or a fountain" (77). Knowledge is derived through the right use of words in the same way Aristotle presents his concept of character and complete proofs. Montaigne said that a man who breaks his word by the misuse of facts betrays human society. He spoke of "the custom […] of weighing and measuring words so exactly, and attaching our honor to them" (174). He derived the material for his essays from nature, especially human nature, and believed that men who stray from natural laws are evil. The fruition of human nature was evident in emotions and instincts controlled consciously by rational thought. Reason reveals human nature "to guide it and improve it when we know it by forming the all-important habits that are a second nature" (xxvi).

Following this line of thought Ralph Waldo Emerson presents a theory of composing from his essay "Thoughts On Art" in which much abstract convoluted language hides a seed of instruction: The genius artist brings the "omniscience of reason" (197) upon the work of fine art in the same way the inventor integrates the invention with the structure of nature. The artist is engaged in the reproduction of matter akin to giving birth. Writing about nature is an answer to the question of immersion in a landscape, since the writing is itself a product of nature, and observation may be what Emerson calls vision, a product of the intellect.

Emerson writes in "Language" that nature is the vehicle of thought.

(1) Words are signs of natural facts. Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance.

(2) Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture, as flowers express to us delicate affections (20).

The essay as artifact is created by a process of immersion in topographies, which in turn invokes reason and the emotions between the hero and the artifact, the essayist's character and capacity for proofs. Emerson's idea of "appearances" as spirit can be ignored for the purposes of establishing the link between words and their facts in nature. An apt anecdote by Montaigne applies: "Between you and me," he writes, "I have always found two things to be in singular harmony: super-celestial opinions and subterranean morals." Montaigne required opinions and morals, work and life to be in harmony, as did Aristotle, in accessible referent-based language.

Scott Russell Sanders wrote in "Speaking A Word For Nature" that "the writer who sees the world in ecological perspective faces a hard problem: how, despite the perfection of our technological boxes, to make us feel the ache and tug of that organic web, how to situate the lives of characters—and therefore of readers—in nature" (226). What is at stake in the essay as artifact is not just a construct of reconstituted human or organic nature that requires an ecologically alert mind; it is, to quote Edward Hoagland, is that "Essayists, by denying themselves [the] license to extravagantly fudge the facts of firsthand observation" compose "under oath" as Barry Lopez insists and Aristotle injunctions. For if the essayist describes a fact in the world incorrectly, such as to mistake a coyote for a wolf, then it is not an error of art or poetics, but rather of character and "There is no possible apology for improbability of plot or depravity of character when they are not necessary and no use is made of them" (263, 264).

This is, perhaps, the dictum of literary nonfictional essays. It is the only way to trace an artifact to its source and verify reality. It is rational process and effects what Hoagland calls "A sense of emergency […] the urge for quicker answers than we get from reading novels: What's happening? How shall we live?"

2

Topography: [Greek. *topos.* place; *graphia.* to write]
a study or detailed description of the various features
of any object or entity and the relationships between them.

In the yard by the lake, a crow flies off with the crumb of a peanut butter cookie. A hummingbird shivers into the pistil of a dangling drooped geranium. White cap chop appears on the lake, chimes ring on the porch, and the gray cat stretches one leg above the glass table. Will it rain again? The crisp green leaves rustle their mint undersides. Somewhere cows group together in a field. A yellow finch sings in the staked pear tree amidst the mottled saffron leaves. A female mallard leads her teal-headed mate to the high green squirrel-baffled bird feeder. She scoops up sunflower seeds in a hurry; the male scans the territory. Earlier, the bull thistle plant keeled over; sopped roots ooze and seed fluff floats like a tiny flock of white birds. Abruptly, on a swoop of air, a murderous shriek. That woman, the one with the barking beagle, runs out of the house by the lake, her hands cover her face. The ducks look up. She cries from some broken place inside herself. Inside the house, the neighbor dangles dead on a rope he has hung in the basement stairwell. When the rain comes the cat sits silent on the front porch. The birds she chases wait under the green sides of leaves in the oak trees.

Is this chunk of composition an artifact? It describes the traits of facts on a four-acre patch of land. Does it have a plot? Aristotle writes that art (artifact) is proof of action. A true essay will provide demonstrative proofs of action and the truth of action can be "guaranteed" (210) by explanation invoking particulars (facts) in the topography. The features or textures in a landscape when selected out in the construction of an essay actually become the plot because they are conjoined as in an living organism. The relationships between them are essential to the structure of the artifact. What Aristotle insists upon in a linear plot construction is a matter of particulars: if the details, the traits of facts, are accurate, the composition becomes, ipso facto, a complete proof, an essential whole. "The construction of […] stories […] should be based on a single action, one that is complete and whole in itself, with a beginning, middle, and end, so as to enable the work to produce its own proper pleasure with the organic unity of a living creature" (256). What he calls "the narrative form" is really a series of separate actions that when connected expand the size of the composition.

The structure of the artifact is the structure of the essay is the structure of the fact—when assembled, they are identical. The literary structure of this formula may be called "plot." A plot cannot be "imposed" upon a collection of facts; in an essay as artifact of reassembled facts through action, observation, and thought, the plot is "discerned" or "released" in the new sense of the human construction.

ARTIFACT (ESSAY) + FACT
FACT + ESSAY (ARTIFACT) = PLOT

The essay as artifact, produced from nature and reproducible by reader in a process like Shook's, is further developed in a theory by Douglas Hesse in his article "Essay Form and Auskomponierung." He says of the essay "The center of some essays […] is like the center of a circle and visible in the same way […] the reader invests the piece with coherence [.] The issue of parts, whole, and order in essays with stories […] is but a manifestation of the broader problem of establishing a referent […] the possibility of describing form by referring parts to a point in the essay. In some essays […] we do better to describe relations among elements as they simultaneously create a field of reference and derive a sense of formedness from the field" (292).

Montaigne says that images of facts, especially when vivified, are inseparable from thought. How could it be otherwise? It was this particular thought in this moment, and no other in the universe, that recreated the image. The structure of thought is the structure of the essay. Good says of Montaigne's essays that their nonfictional statements do not necessarily comprise a specific body of knowledge, that the knowledge itself is not organized, but that it is reorganized into its form, its plot, upon a reading. Montaigne refers to an "informality […] of adapting to the object [because] matter takes priority over manner. The natural structure of the particular content is preferred to the imposed or inherited structures of rhetorical art" (29, 30). He tries to stay as close to this as possible because his edict is that "Thought in the essay stays close to its object and shares their space and atmosphere. The connections between thoughts in the essay are often made through things, rather than being linked directly in a continuous argument. The essay is a provisional reflection of an ephemeral experience of an event or object" (Good 7). Such qualities become essential in an artifact, the only thing we have in the end to establish reality. These artifacts of place are actual "cognitive objects" (Montaigne 96) of place and as such constitute the cognitive, artistic, and cultural history of a place.

In "Landscape and Imagination" Scott Russell Sanders writes "It is a […] discipline to root the mind in a particular landscape, to know it […] as a resident." The prose fragment about the yard and the suicide, is not that intimate engagement with a place? Traits of facts

become an artifact of topography precisely because "all landscapes [are] a palimpsest, written over for centuries by humans and for millennia by the rest of nature. Every fence, highway, billboard, and clearing is an utterance" (95, 89).

Sanders enlivens this concept in "The Singular First Person." He writes "if the essay is to hold up; it must be driven by deep concerns. The surface of a river is alive with lights and reflections, the breaking of foam over rocks, but beneath that dazzle it is going somewhere. We should expect as much from an essay: the shimmer and play of mind on the surface and in the depths a strong current" (34). This lovely statement implies the plot in the topography, in this case a river. What is the deep concern? How is it revealed, achieved? It has something to do with the two essay strata, topography (facts) and essayist (thoughts) and the relationships between the two that create the artifact, which is the plot. Montaigne says "Things in themselves perhaps have their own weights, measures and states; but inwardly, when they enter into us, the mind cuts them to its own conceptions" (31). This happens when the essayist, the hero of the composition, goes on a journey.

3

> Essayist As Hero: [French. e*ssai*. trial, attempt; Greek. *heros* demi-god defender, protector] one who plays a vital role in plot development or around whom the plot is structured.

There was this boy who mowed the lawn every Friday afternoon during the summer. His name was Arnold and his family was from Tennessee. I kept Dutch Blue rabbits in a cage on a shady edge of my driveway that faced Arnold's lawn. I liked to watch him mow so I brought the rabbits grain at noon that day when I heard the mower start. I ducked behind the cage and watched him through the wire mesh while the rabbits sniffed my lips. Arnold was an athlete, a track star. His mother told me he ran six minute miles consistently. She looked like Mrs. Cleaver on Leave It To Beaver. Arnold wore a pair of black Converse high top sneakers, cut off shorts, and a green Tee shirt. Brown bangs obscured his pimply forehead. He had a big nose; I don't know why I found him so attractive. Maybe it was his thinness, his accent, his silence; he rarely spoke directly to me. There was a hill behind his house that leveled into a soggy valley between our yards. He was mowing in the valley when I saw him jump and point to his foot. I stood up. The rabbits froze. Arnold made a sound like my rabbits when they were scared, but he didn't run, he just pointed to his foot. He looked directly at me, there was no one else. I knew what was wrong, but I couldn't move. I hated myself in that moment; I have always hated that moment. He seemed to lose power and dragged himself up the hill, into the garage. An ambulance arrived and I waited for the stretcher. He was covered in white. Should I shout to him, "Arnold, I'm sorry?" I could not move. His mother ran into our little valley and said, to me, "Will you help me look for his foot?" She held up the toe of his sneaker against her white apron and said, "It's not in here. We have to find it—he's an athlete." I obeyed. Together we ran our fingers through the grass, some of it cut, some of it shaggy. I hoped I would be the one to glide my hand across a toe.

Scott Russell Sanders says that essays are inextricably linked to place, but it is more than that, he adds "I locate myself through what I love" (ix). In composing, Sanders

experiences the landscape through his emotions and offers his readers the same experience: "The explorations from which we return to see our home ground afresh may be physical ones […] or they may be journeys of the mind, such as those we take through stories and photographs and paintings" (95).

The composer is the hero of the personal essay. The essayist begins a journey, physical or mental, and makes attempts, faces trials, finds protectors along the way, and may become a protector to some one or some thing. The hero, often one with a flaw, is usually changed by experiences in the topography and brings something back to the departure point that makes the essayist, at least, a hero to the reader. Field data is collected or remembered and reconstructed as an essay artifact. The prose scene above is a collection of facts, the structure of which corresponds to the thoughts, the actions, and the event. This forms the plot and it was and is accessed, in part, through emotions leading to and through the topography of that yard.

Composing is what Aristotle calls an act of "imitation." The essayist as imitator represents actions of self, actions of others, and objects or places in the topography (224). Poetry, persuasive language, has its origin in human nature because "imitation is natural to man" (226) and "it was through their original aptitude, and by a series of improvements for the most part gradual on their first efforts, that they created poetry out of their improvisations" (227). The essay is a kind of improvisation of events. The reader, of course, will recognize the structure of reality in finely-improved imitations.

The hero experiences objective reality with a unique thought structure, a process that Montaigne calls a "pattern": "There is no one who, if he listens to himself, does not discover in himself a pattern all his own, a ruling pattern, which struggles against education and against the tempest if the passions that oppose it" (186). This pattern corresponds to the structure of action, emotions, topography, plot, and artifact in a simple formula.

HERO > TOPOGRAPHY = PLOT + ARTIFACT

The hero who sets out to explore a topography reacts with emotion, sometimes painful, to encountered "textures." Rational analysis appropriately assembles the topographical textures into the essay artifact in a process of mental and physical, inner and outer, exchange. Montaigne writes in "Of Experience" that "We must learn to endure what we cannot avoid. Our life is composed, like the harmony of the world, of contrary things, also of different tones, sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, soft and loud. If a musician liked only one kind, what would he have to say? He must know how to use them together and blend them. Our existence is impossible without this mixture" (326). It is Montaigne's ability to reveal the man in the mixture, the "plot" of the mixture, the assembler of the mixture, that enables the reader to apply his particular details to universal issues. The artist and man of the world, supervising the writing of the book, contrives to tell of himself in such a way that the individual not only appears clearly, but appears in his most universally human light. "The ability to do this is not a literary device. It is not a tool of Montaigne, but a part of him. It is […] a habit of thought" (Frame xxviii). This habit of thought creates an identifiable pattern not only in the essay but also in nature.

What about accuracy? An inaccurate essay is a distortion of nature—of facts, process, character, and reason. Joseph Epstein says that the reader has a contract with the writer that guarantees that "the facts in his essay as facts that have an existence in reality" that, in fact, "The personal essay […] is bounded […] grounded—by reality. There are no unreliable narrators in personal essays […] an unreliable narrator is just another name for a bad writer" (14). Aristotle says that the unreliable narrator has unreliable character. The truth, once it is known through complete proofs, is used to persuade, especially through the

emotions. Epstein says similarly "In writing, honesty implies […] the accurate, altogether truthful, reporting of feelings, for in literature only the truth is finally persuasive and persuasiveness is […] the measure of truth" (19).

The hero of the essay, the self, is actually the "plotting" force behind the assemblage of traits of facts in a topography. Good writes "The mixture of elements in the essay—the unsorted 'wholeness' of experience it represents—can only be held together by the concept of self. The selection and order of the ideas and objects can have no other basis. The order is 'as it occurred to me'"(8). Hence the words take on the structure of the experience. "The heart of the essay as a form is this moment of characterization, or recognition, or figuration, where the self finds a pattern in the world and the world finds a pattern in the self. This moment is not the result of applying a preconceived method, but is a spontaneous, unpredictable discovery, thought often prepared by careful attention and observation. This discovery can be about the self or about the world, but is mostly about a combination of both (29). The essay itself is stratified between these two poles of hero and topography, reason and emotion, fact and artifact, thought and plot, action and plot, object and plot. The plot is never imposed in an essay because, as Good notes, the act of composing "authentically replicates the natural flow of […] thoughts (167) No one says it better than Lopate who writes "in an essay, the track of a person's thoughts struggling to achieve some understanding of a problem is the plot" (169). And he sums it up by saying "language as a symbolic form of action" (173).

4

> Topo Map: [Latin. *mappa.* napkin on which maps were drawn] topographic maps summarize the earth's topography, or the configuration of the landscape, in two dimensions. Contour lines have a constant vertical spacing called the contour interval. Horizontal spacing of contour lines show the steepness of the slope on the land surface.

Shirley Jackson wrote her autobiography about raising children in Bennington Vermont. Her husband was a Bennington College professor. Jackson wheeled her team of toddlers around in multiple strollers on Main Street. She attended stuffy parties at the college with her husband. The curvy roads leading in and out were hard to navigate when they were drunk. But the reader can navigate them easily by following Jackson's essays in two accurate dimensions, the pattern of her thoughts that template the patterns of topography around Bennington.

The gazebo where Captain Von Trapp proposed to Maria exists in a sunny field in Vienna Austria. He probably didn't sing "Here I am standing there loving you, so somewhere in my life I must have done something right," but according to the autobiography, he did meet her there after ending his engagement to the Countess. It is easy to spot the round white roof of the gazebo in the glade, slide your hands along the rails where they sat, and look out the windows toward the Alps. The topography is perfectly mapped, place and the action of betrothal are the same form intertwined by the action of her thought.

Does the prose segment above follow this linear construction? Does it have what Aristotle requires of imitation (composition), such that each imitation reproduces a single action, and the collection of single actions are necessary to the whole, neither expendable nor adorned? He insists that narratives, in whole, have a beginning, a middle, and an end because "to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also be of a certain definite magnitude […] to be taken in by the eye, so a story or plot must be of some length, but of a length to be taken in by the memory" (233).

Aristotle writes of styles of expression in language "it is not enough to know what we ought to say; we must also say it as we ought" (164). To this end he developed rules of style to eliminate ambiguous meaning, to achieve prose that was clear and precise. "Style to be good must be clear […] appropriate, avoiding both meanness and undo elevation […] Clearness is secured by using the words (nouns and verbs alike) that are current and ordinary […] a writer must disguise his art and give the impression of speaking naturally and not artificially. Naturalness is persuasive, artificiality is the contrary" (167). Thought that reflects such style in the composing strata of the essay, thought based upon scrupulous field data and accurate assemblage, will produce an artifact that is reproducible in the field in reverse formula. Such style is texture on the essay map that corresponds to texture in the landscape.

The reader can follow the essay Topo Map back to the thing described because if it incorporates these the rhetorical and poetic styles of expression used to create the imitation. Aristotle supports this notion "one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole. For that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is no real part of the whole" (233, 234).

The essayist is most certainly a navigator, an explorer, a mountaineer, a meanderer in the terrain. The essayist maps the topography by following the discoveries of thought. Epstein calls the essay "a form of discovery" (15). Topographic properties are "mapped" by thought and the action of this process forms the plot, the form of the artifact. The plot is discerned in the topography in the same way the composer gathers data through experience, emotion and thought. Epstein writes "the reader stumbles into facts as he goes along […] through the mediation of the essayist […] finds his or her own experience enlarged" (20, 21).

THOUGHT (ACTION + EMOTION) + TOPOGRAPHY > PLOT = MAP + ARTIFACT

Robert Root "The Art of the Personal Essay" calls the plot in the essay an "assemble the associations of memory" (220) which are made by the reader who discerns relationships among the parts. He dismisses the notion of a liner plot "I'm not locked into limited forms of writing any more than I'm locked into limited forms of reading the world. I can't wait in the world for someone to come up with a clear, precise, linear explanation of events […] why would such explanations be the only ones I can provide for others" (221).

Richard Selzer, a essayist whose poetic facts are rendered directly from surgical procedures, writes about of process "My real subject is language itself, which provides a more direct way to experience than the intellect. It is the soul of the writer exteriorized and made visible. To take up a word, then lay it down again to chose another; to set this one down on the page as if it were a pebble and what is being made a mosaic, this is the greatest pleasure" (15). What he describes is a map in two dimensions, the mind of a

surgeon moving though the operating arena to his patients and back again to form the essay artifact.

5

> Sailboat Tacking: [Germanic. *taque.* fastening] sailing a zigzag course to maximize benefit form the wind; a course of action meant to minimize opposition to the attainment of a goal.

The Captain with the map, bits of map of islands scribbled on a napkin, was ready to navigate the Central America sea topography. He read the wind on the back of his hand; his skin was like tumbled glass. "Just look at the ripples," he said, that trilled the water like piccolo notes. Topography is shaped by wind, waves and lake chop, mountains and deltas. This was a vast shallow sea inside a barrier reef that damned the Atlantic Ocean. The live reef creature wall snaked the coast like the edge of a tub. Inside ships could sail a deep channel, maybe 90 feet, surrounded by the neck deep lime green water of exposed reefs. Homeward, he sailed northwest into the wind, tacking all the way, 9 knots, snagging the wind on a geometric two dimensional plane.

The essay "tacks" between the interior life of the mind and the exterior terrain, capturing both in a self-conscious analysis that will eventually become the artifact. The most interesting part of the composing is the processing of external traits of facts through the individual mind, through facets never seen before. Each unique assemblage adds to the knowledge of particular things, of things arranged in structures. How many people know that this Captain's skin has texture structured by tropical winds? Or that a sailboat, like an essayist, can take a headlong challenge by using the power that creates the obstacle? For the essayist, the obstacle is often this tendency to "stray" in thinking—hence the reputation of the essay as so many endless channels. Yet this very effect of buffeted thought is the action in reaction to topography that powers the plot. The effect of thinking about a fact is like observing a quark: examination always changes it.

Graham Good writes in The Observing Self Rediscovering the Essay of Montaigne: The critical attitude to […] accumulated [observations] is to review and select only parts of it, those which correspond to observable fact. This implies a clear separation of the order of words form the order of things, and a comparison of the first to the second to check its accuracy of representation (2). The observations, the field data, which comprise two strata of the essay form, what Good calls "object and idea," he says "are interwoven and limit each other's development. Thought in the essay tends to be presented as experienced, not as afterthought; as it responds to objects and events on the spot, not as it is later arranged and systematized. This is the essential uniqueness of essayistic discourse: neither the order of thoughts or the order of things predominates. The essay's fabric is woven from these alterations" (7,8). The "idea" strata of the essay, the composer's thought, is the organizing principal called plot. If thought + artifact correspond to, reproduce a thing, a complete proof has been established and the essayist's character made credible. The alterations between these two strata, between inside and outside, between thought and fact, structure the plot.

Good sums up this idea with the following remarkable statement: "every narrative combines two dimensions in various propositions, one chronological and the other nonchronological. The first may be called the episodic dimension, which characterizes the story as made out of events. The second is the configurational dimension, according to which the plot construes significant whole out of scattered events….to tell and to follow a story is already to reflect upon events in order to encompass them in successive wholes. Personal essays are well formed when they invite and reward readers' performance of this configurative act" (295).

6

> Switchbacking Trail: [German. *zwukse.* change, reversal]
> a zigzag arrangement of a roadway for surmounting the
> grade of a steep hill common in mountainous districts;
> a hairpin curve.

Double blazes on mountain trails always indicate a switch, and how apt that it should be this doubling that alerts the hiker who must move horizontally across a vertical plane in order to ascend. Sometimes the backcountry hiker continues past the blazes into the woods and loses the way. Sometimes the hiker is not looking up. Hard worn paths that stray beyond the blazes lure many hikers past the mark. Confounded, exhausted, the hiker returns to the double blazes and marks the switch. It is necessary for efficient ascension.

Some essays stray too far along with their essayists. In this case an artifact is produced that misleads to the point of irritation, what Aristotle calls "Bad taste in language" which may take any of four forms: (1) The misuse of compound words (2) the employment of strange words (3) the use of long, unreasonable, or frequent epithets (4) metaphors (171, 172). These forms might correspond to the hiker on a lark, the sailboat on a slide, when in fact, the switch between the examining mind and the encountered facts must effectively drive the reader toward assimilation of what Aristotle said was the "arrangement of parts […] of a certain definite magnitude" (233). In this case the arrangement is assisted by the efficient use of power in reaching the goal, or the point of the essay, in manageable, edited style.

Hesse says there are two kinds of essays "the vertical form, with the strata of propositions relating each part of the work logically and hierarchically to each other part, has been accepted—or, more important, has been perceivable—as a proper and reasonable state of writing since its prescription by classical rhetoricians. Anything narrative would obviously display horizontal form, "then and then and then" until closure. That narrative is natural and inevitable […] has been steadily challenged […] we recognize stories as well formed because we learned to do so. However, the personal essay […] creates form neither purely vertical nor horizontal in the manner that articles and stories do. In light of expectations. there seems to be no form at all (302, 304). Hesse asserts that the best essay form displays both vertical and horizontal range "held together by the metaphor it builds" (303). Readers, he writes, expect essays to be clearly horizontal or vertical because of "the charges of formlessness that have been leveled against personal essays" (304).

7

Meandering River: [Latin. *meander.* confusion, intricacies]
loop-like development of a river channel produced by erosion
on the outer edge and deposition on the inner edge of the bends;
to move or cause to move in a sinuous, spiral, or circular course.

The Catskill Mountains in New York State were formed from rubble descending the slopes of the Allegheny plateau. Melt water poured into the alluvium, meandered to the delta, and finally sorted the deposition of wavy sands into the sea. The geometry of the meandering river displays balance on the inside and outside bends of channel velocity. The river eased through the valley from side to side and carried rocks from the mountains in the fast deep center. This meandering river structure, seemingly aimless, is the one course of efficient flow. Today the story of the eroded plateau is in the topography.

If the essay "meanders" as its reputation seems to imply, how is it that the thought and the experience of the composer that leads to action, can be called a plot? The essay very definitely assigns a different meaning to the term plot than is typical of the horizontal plot. Even Aristotle said that action was the structure of the plot. The essayist in action is either in the field or at the keyboard, in either case composing the artifact by assembling the facts of memory. It is the reader who reenacts the plot by an act of thinking. Good emphasizes this connection between thought, fact, and plot "the way of writing that conforms most closely to the natural form of thought, which in turn is trying to approximate to inner and outer nature. it reflects the process of thinking rather than reporting and ordering its results. Just as the mind should adapt and yield to the flow of experience, the essay should yield and adapt to the flow of thought" (41, 42).

Lopate said there is no guarantee that the personal essay will attain a shapeliness or a sense of aesthetic inevitability. The well-made short story has a recognizable arc that seems built into the genre, whereas even an essay that is 'well-made' seems to follow a more intuitive, groping path. In a well-wrought essay, while the search appears to be widening, even losing its way, it is actually eliminating false hypotheses, narrowing its emotional target and zeroing in on it" (xxxviii).

The cascading mountain runoff is an excellent analogy for the concept of the movement from individual [mountain] to universal [ocean]. "The concrete details of personal experience earn the generalization […] and the generalization sends the author back for more particulars" (Lopate xl). This concept invokes Aristotle's rule of complete proofs which can only be found in the particular case extended to the universal case.

Lisa Knopp "Excavations" compares the essay to excavations of moles. "For the nature essayist, the subjects of our excavations fall at our feet like bread rained from

heaven. A dead opossum. A flushed pheasant. An approaching cloud of mayflies. Bare branches studded with white-headed eagles. Consequently, when I was stopped short by a dead mole on the road, I knew I would write about her, though I wasn't yet sure what I would write" (Gutkind 123). This essay fragment reconstructs her thought which is linked to the field data. What is the most efficient route to the point of an essay when the essayist is meandering? On the one hand, the mind slams into its subject in the field—the inner depositional bend in a river—then veers back into processing—the outer erosive bend in a river. The deep center of the river carries the flooded topography of the mountain into the sea, as the essayist drives home the point of personal action to the universal case. The reader finds the artifact and feels the spark of knowledge in the act of reconstruction.

E.B. White writes a "map" of Grand Central topography, a place which can be easily reconstructed and found by the reader. He writes "Descend, if you please, into the great hall of the Grand Central Terminal at quarter to nine of an October morning; the room probably contains more persons on errands of doubtful import than any other place in the world, yet I defy anyone to miss the air of great goings on. Under the stars of its dome, among the shifting bulletins that flap the news of destinations, life becomes charged with a heavenly disturbance, and the heart fills and responds as to a blood transfusion. Luckily, I am content to accept this suggestion of meaningful existence without analyzing it; and if at length the room seems too terribly chock-full of meaning, think of the choice of exists--down a ramp to an oyster stew, up a flight to a frosted chocolate, through a door to the Yale Club, down a hatch to the shuttle, along a corridor to a taxi, down a stairway to a ten-cent private dressing room, or through some palms to the lobby of the commodore" (39). Notice that White moves the reader back and forth on a meander between the structure of his thoughts and the structure of the place.

Selzer achieves the same zigzagging mapping of a courtyard in Honduras in "Imelda." He writes "Just in front of the hospital was a thirsty courtyard where mobs of waiting people squatted or lay in the meager shade, and where, on dry days, a fine dust rose through which untethered shouldered. Against the walls of this courtyard, gaunt, dejected men stood, their faces like their country, preternaturally solemn, leaden. Here no one looked up at the sky. Every head was bent beneath a wide-brimmed straw hat. In the days that followed, from the doorway of the dispensary I would watch the brown mountains sliding about, drinking the hospital into their shadow as the afternoon grew later and later, flattening us by their very altitude" (86). It is certainly possible to discover this courtyard exactly as described. Once found, the reader would covet the new insights through Selzer's assemblage.

Root also creates maps of artifacts. "I presumed that, once I started wandering, I would stumble over all kinds of insights, lying across the trail […] I wasn't looking for a way to understand the island but rather for a way to connect with it, become part of it. This connection isn't something you find, but rather something that finds you. You can't go out on the trail and get it; instead you have to be prepared to receive it. Deliberately searching for insight activates all the barriers of self-consciousness and intellectuality that separate you from the natural world; it closes down your instincts, your intuitions, your receptors. You achieve connection not by aggressive search and seizure but by passive openness and acceptance" (artserve). Root wanders the most efficient course through topo textures; this is attained by adaptation of the mind to the terrain through action and experience and back again to form the artifact. Root is right about the process: it requires surrender to an organic plot.

8

Hero As Teacher [Latin. *professor.* teacher of highest rank]
to bring understanding to somebody through an experience;
to impart knowledge for a period of time in a particular place.

The Teacher: The lesson shortly begins after her entrance. Neurotically I paste my eyes to the words in the reading we are going over. She touches upon the main points as she struggles to enhance our knowledge of composing our work. Her voice is so soothing and relaxing. It puts me to sleep at the same time it is keeping me awake. I don't get it. She pauses for some moment as she takes a breath, she relaxes, and continues teaching. This pause is not long or boring, it is what gets me relaxed and thinking. What was her last point she made? I am soon in a state of tranquility. I do not notice my surroundings; the people outside the window, the students chattering, or even the slightest movement of the person next to me. I am in awe and completely devoted to her words. –Mirissa Brown, Advanced Composition

A good writing class is based on discourse because there is a direct relationship between human social activity and language; by engaging in dialogue with another person, the relation between those two speakers is transformed as well as the speaker's "personhood" and the world—material and social—within which those speakers enter into relation. The act of dialogue is an act of creation and re-creation, because along with transforming or recreating the relation between speakers and the subject under discussion teacher and students also create new objects of knowledge.

The teacher of the essay, of nonfiction composing, teachers "under oath" as Barry Lopez said, because the teacher gives the students the tools to communicate the truth rationally and to build character. Aristotle said that "All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse" (231).

Thomas E. Recchio "A Dialogic Approach to the Essay" writes that "an essay, the track of a person's thoughts struggling to achieve some understanding of a problem, is the plot, the adventure [so that] teaching the essay is misdirected because it ignores the dialogic quality […] it ossifies a fluid form, turning it into a series of types: the narrative essay, the descriptive essay, the argumentative essay" (274).

The essay segment above "The Teacher" by a student invokes this appreciation for a dialogue in which "There is a subtext, a deep structure of sorts, that we interpret and to which we respond in the context of what we know about the person with whom we are talking and what we know about her/his characteristic use of language" (274). Such an insight enacted through the professor helps the students to read all people and situations with understanding such that when their subjects appear in their essays, they will create more accurate reproductions of the world. This is why the teacher is a hero.

Recchio concludes "Teaching the essay as an approach to the discourse of written language, as an attempt to engage in the dialogue of discourse, however, would shift the focus of the teaching of writing from empty, abstract forms that student writers must find some way to fill, to the student writers' role as participants in discourse, constant practitioners of spoken discourse whose expertise can be exploited as a means of effective writing to the end of making students participants in and shapers of the terms of written discourse" (287, 288).

The concluding formula for Essay Topography sets up a system in which the hero makes a journey, experiences the topography through action and emotion, constructs a map that becomes an essay artifact which contains the plot of thought and topography and can be rationally reconstructed with the artifact as map by the reader and that such method is teachable.

HERO > THOUGHT (ACTION + EMOTION) + TOPOGRAPHY + MAP = PLOT + ARTIFACT > READER > TEACHER

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