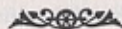


*A Ved Mehta Reader:  
The Craft of the Essay*

1998

INTRODUCTION

*Lightning and the Lightning Bug*



In 1956, when I was twenty-two, I graduated from Pomona College, in California, and went up to Oxford. There I started working for a second bachelor's degree, for in those days the best way to take full advantage of what Oxford offered and to enter into the stream of English life was to work for an undergraduate degree at the university. I was reading history, and was required to write one or two essays a week and to submit them to the scrutiny of my tutors, most of whom were world-class scholars. While I was reading aloud to my tutor in the history of the Middle Ages one of my first essays, having to do with the Anglo-Saxons, he stopped me just after I had used the word "motivation," and asked how it was that I tended to reach for jargon when a good English word was to hand.

"But everyone uses 'motivation,'" I protested.

"Jargon is imprecise, and encourages weak thought," he said. "A careful writer would use a word like 'impulse.'"

Until then, I had thought I was a tolerably good writer, and had believed that after working over a draft several times I was able to say what I wanted to say. Indeed, before going up to Oxford, I had completed an entire book, an autobiography, much of which had been set

down two years earlier, in the course of a summer. But I was so deeply in awe of Oxford and its tutorial system, and so impressionable, that my tutor's questioning of one infelicitous word had the effect of unravelling my confidence in my writing even as it began to sensitize me to the nuances of language. For some time thereafter, whenever I wrote a sentence for an essay I would read it as my tutor might, and would conclude that almost everything was wrong with it. I was reminded of an accomplished pianist friend of mine who was then undergoing intense psychoanalysis and had become in the course of her treatment so self-conscious that she could scarcely play a five-finger exercise. But I felt sure that, just as her treatment contained the promise of her becoming a better pianist, so my Oxford education contained the promise of my becoming a better writer. The road, however, turned out to be a long and arduous one—and to stretch far beyond Oxford.

I recall how daunting were my first steps along that road: what they led me to was a chaos of randomly assembled materials that had to be subjected first to the elusive formulation of ideas and then to the untamable nature of language itself. I was constantly tempted to put off writing. There was always more to read, more to reflect on. I found I had first to decide what, exactly, I wanted to say, even if in the course of writing I should find myself saying something totally different. (All ideas grow and develop as one writes, I learned, since one's memory expands through the process of association.) Nevertheless, having that initial idea, though it might be only the germ of one, enabled me to overcome the terror of the blank page. So as not to feel constrained or constricted, I would write what I came to call a "vomit draft," in which I would pour out everything I could think of without worrying about sense or grammar. Then I would start the process of revision—cutting and shaping my thoughts, which would help me learn what, if anything, I knew about the subject. As I pressed on with my essay, I would try to come up with the most telling arguments or examples to buttress whatever point I was making. To locate them required me to interrupt the writing and go searching through many books. In time, I learned to find my way around indexes and tables of contents, and around library catalogues as well. Sometimes I would put aside the essay and return to it later, casting a cold eye on it. The process as I describe it here may sound simple, but, as every student knows, it is turbulent and involves a lot of angst.

I remember that I was struck by the elegance and lustre of many of the essays written by my English contemporaries; compared to their essays, I realized, my best efforts came across as dull and lame. (In England, writing well in one's chosen subject is the foundation of a good education.) Before long, I discovered that many of the undergraduates I admired had developed their writing style as schoolboys by imitating the styles of great authors or, if they were studying to be classicists, by translating Latin or Greek prose or verse into the style of a contemporary English author, or vice versa. Sometimes these students wrote with a certain archness and artificiality, but the best of them wrote with facility and a grace of expression adapted to the subject at hand. To cultivate ear and eye, some of them would play a game that consisted of picking out characteristic passages from authors ancient and modern and seeing who could identify them. I tried to play the game, too, but, because my knowledge of classical texts was either shaky or nonexistent, I was hopeless at it.

I confided my doubts about my schooling to my tutor in the history of the Middle Ages, and he said that he thought I needed to read more widely. I told him that since the age of fifteen, when I first started speaking English (I'd grown up speaking Punjabi), I had done little besides read—and that, like many foreigners for whom English was not their mother tongue, I was an autodidact.

"Ah," he said. "But have you studied what makes one author's work different from another's?" He explained that for any piece of writing to prove finally effective and memorable depended on its author's having found the right voice and the right style. For the study of these matters, he directed me to the "Oxford Book of English Prose," a selection of choice morsels by mostly British authors culled and introduced by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and published in 1925. It was a feast: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, Samuel Johnson, Lamb, Coleridge, Jane Austen, De Quincey, the Brontë sisters, Melville, Dickens, Matthew Arnold, Shaw, and many others. Over the next months and years, I returned to the book again and again. Genius being, by definition, inimitable and transcendent, the selections certainly didn't encourage me to attempt any such feats but, rather, made anything I did attempt seem insipid. Many might find a study of the works of genius useless, because it might stop them from ever trying to write. They would do well to go their merry way and, like Walt

Whitman, discover their inner resources on their own. How often have I met a mother who told me that her daughter wrote beautiful letters and would write a book if she could only find the time. Perhaps so. But, in my experience, for every natural writer there are ten or more writers who have to labor over their craft. Mark Twain once said, "The difference between the *right* word and the *almost* right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Even so, it is hard to imagine Mark Twain—a great writer who made a virtue of seeming artless—studying the great masters of the past.

I myself found that over time I had been helped by my study of the masters. Because I could savor only a few pages of the "Oxford Book of English Prose" at a sitting, I dipped into the volume whenever I had a little time, reading and rereading a selection to ponder its tone and cadence, its diction and imagery, its movement and structure. It gradually became clear to me that well-wrought sentences from different authors had a distinctive logic and beauty, which could no more be tampered with than could the authors' signatures. Unquestionably, no two writers were alike, yet it took me a long time to discern just what stylistic characteristics made every writer different from every other and then to put those differences into words.

The precision and finish of prose became a passion with me, and I was led on to grammar books, most notably Fowler's "Modern English Usage," and to full-length essays not only by authors in Quiller-Couch's anthology, which didn't include anything published after 1914, but also by twentieth-century authors: by Virginia Woolf, of whose ardent prose it may be said, among other things, that it launched a whole new way of thinking and writing; by Edmund Wilson, who encapsulated in sinewy prose the life, work, and critical value of great authors as if no one else had ever written about them; by V. S. Pritchett, who never wrote a book review that didn't contain an unexpected image; and by E. B. White, whose homey yet elegant turns of phrase made you think that no one could convey, for instance, the feel of the day better than he could.

My first, autobiographical book, entitled "Face to Face," which was written before I went up to Oxford, was published in 1957, just after I completed my first year there, and by that time my writing style—indeed, my whole consciousness—had gone through such changes

under the pressure of writing and rewriting my essays that I could scarcely bear to acknowledge authorship of it. It seemed prosaic, and the story seemed to be carried along more by the nature of the material than by the force of the style. Perhaps as a result, my second book, "Walking the Indian Streets," published three years later, when I had graduated from Oxford and was doing further study at Harvard, seemed to err in the opposite direction: style seemed to overshadow substance. It did, however, get me started on my vocation, because in the course of working on it I met William Shawn, the editor of *The New Yorker*. The meeting began my long and happy relationship with the magazine: it lasted twenty-seven years, until the end of his editorship, in 1987, and resulted in the publication of that book and of sixteen others as pieces in *The New Yorker*. Shawn himself edited almost all of them, and in the course of working with him I absorbed his—and, by extension, his magazine's—principles of good writing, which were, as best I can sum them up, clarity, harmony, truth, and unflinching courtesy to the reader.

Like many other students and writers, I owe a debt of gratitude to my mentors—along with the literary masters I read—for teaching me much about writing. In the mid-nineteen-eighties, when Shawn's departure seemed imminent, and I was no longer able to count on making my living just from writing, as I had done during most of my adult life, I myself taught writing at half a dozen colleges and universities. It is a truism that writing can't be taught the way history or physics can, so I was pleasantly surprised at how much progress was made by those of my students who were open to suggestions, were attentive readers, and were patient during the various stages of writing and revising. Still, the best I could do as a teacher was to help students, in Emerson's words, "bear the fruit they were meant to bear," for, ultimately, the voice that is best suited to both beginners and pros is the one that comes most naturally to each group. It may take years to know what that voice is, but when one finds it, there is a shock of recognition. Of course, any writing, whether occasional or frequent, and whether hasty or enduring, requires one to stick to one's last as a lifetime apprentice. So it is that some forty years after I published my first book I am still struggling with words and sentences, drafts and alterations.

The eight nonfiction pieces collected in this volume all appeared

first in *The New Yorker*, between 1961 and 1993, and, later, with one exception ("Naturalized Citizen No. 984-5165"), as individual chapters of as many books. (I have reprinted them as they appeared in their final book form, without trying to update or doctor them. Although I wrote them to be read at any time, not surprisingly they have a period flavor.) Although what I wrote during those years was intended to become part of some larger whole, each piece was also intended to be free-standing. Shawn published entire books by me and by other writers serially, always insisting that each piece had to be, like everything else in the magazine, independent, self-contained, and self-explanatory. (In publishing entire books, he was following a tradition not only of his predecessor, Harold Ross, who founded *The New Yorker*, but also of editors of nineteenth-century periodicals. This system was the opposite of that followed by some present-day editors, who instead carve out material from books on the brink of publication and shape teaser articles from them.) Nevertheless, these eight pieces are examples of literary journalism, and such journalism has a long lineage in English. One of the first English journalists was Joseph Addison (1672–1719), who in 1711, with Sir Richard Steele, founded *The Spectator*—a London daily that contained only one piece per issue—and wrote a good deal of it himself. His place in English letters is clearly spelled out by what Samuel Johnson has to say about him: "He has restored virtue to its dignity, and taught innocence not to be ashamed. No greater felicity can genius attain than that of having purified intellectual pleasures, separated mirth from indecency . . . of having taught a succession of writers to bring elegance and gaiety to the aid of goodness."

Shawn, in his own way, resembled Addison, because Addison's pieces in *The Spectator* and the pieces that Shawn published in *The New Yorker* belong not only to journalism but also, in a broad sense, to the more distinguished and more inclusive literary form known as the essay. The term *essai*, meaning "attempt," was first used by the French writer Michel de Montaigne (1533–92). "Could my mind find a firm footing, I should not be making essays, but coming to conclusions," he writes in "On Repentance." "It is, however, always in its apprenticeship and on trial." His essays—on repentance, on idleness, on the imagination, on the education of children, on friendship, on cannibals, on smells, and on experience, among other topics—were often

written as self-portrayals. "Others shape the man; I portray him," he writes, "and offer to the view one in particular, who is ill-shaped enough, and whom, could I refashion him, I should certainly make very different from what he is. But there is no chance of that."

The essay had its greatest flowering in England. Growing out of the literary and philosophical essays of Francis Bacon in the late sixteenth century and the autobiographical essays of Abraham Cowley in the seventeenth, it became with Swift—perhaps the most acerbic practitioner of the form—an instrument of satire, as a means of reforming society, in the eighteenth, and came into its own in the nineteenth, when it dealt with a great variety of subjects by such writers as Coleridge, Lamb, Carlyle, De Quincey, Macaulay, and Mill. Their style was forged in an age when men of letters were trained in Greek and Latin. During their school years and then at the universities, they all read the same texts, they all belonged to a community of readers, and each of them consciously sought to cultivate an individual voice. They specialized in what today we would call "opinion," yet their opinions were often expressed in grandiloquent styles, based on the works of their predecessors and their contemporaries. "Is not the principal and most famous branch of modern learning that of learning to understand the learned?" Montaigne had written. "Is not this the common and final purpose of all studies? Our opinions are grafted one on another. The first serves as a stock for the second, the second for the third. We thus climb the ladder, step by step; and hence it is that the man who has mounted highest has often more honour than he deserves; for he has only raised himself by the height of one inch on the shoulders of the last but one."

Sometimes Montaigne's man didn't raise himself at all, because his foothold was on rungs of opinion only, and opinions, by their very nature, are idiosyncratic and slippery. For instance, not only Johnson but also Pope, Thackeray, and Macaulay made extravagant claims for the genius of Addison, with Macaulay going as far as to compare him to Shakespeare and Cervantes. Yet Virginia Woolf, in her book entitled "The Common Reader," dismisses Addison as "a writer of the second class," who had "little to give us." She maintains that what writers such as Addison liked is no longer what readers in the modern period like. "As the charm of their writing depends much more upon taste than upon conviction," she writes, "a change of manners is often

quite enough to put us out of touch altogether. . . . [Addison] was extremely fond of saying that men ought not to be atheists, and that women ought not to wear large petticoats. This directly inspires in us not so much a sense of distaste as a sense of difference." Whether we read Addison's admirers and detractors for the sheer pleasure of their writing or because we agree with their opinions, we may in the end come away learning more about the writers themselves than about Addison.

In our century, the form of the essay has been so thoroughly transmuted as sometimes to include no explicit opinion whatever but, rather, to consist of a combination of implicit opinion and reporting—in fact, to encompass almost any kind of nonfiction writing. Moreover, whereas many earlier essays tended to be expository, short, and formal, and often made an appeal to the intellect, the essays of our day tend to be personal, long, and informal, and often make an appeal to our emotions. (James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time" comes to mind.) Indeed, in Ross's and Shawn's *New Yorker*, narratives of fact and quoted speech were considered superior to pieces expressing explicit opinions, as if facts were precious and opinions cheap. The magazine categorized its variety of essays with such rubrics as "Profiles," "A Reporter at Large," and "Onward and Upward with the Arts." The form, however, has all along been so elastic that the term "essay" can accommodate almost any kind of writing.

One of the authors in the "Oxford Book of English Prose," Arthur Clutton-Brock (1868–1924), distinguishes poetry from prose in this way: "If the cardinal virtue of poetry is love, the cardinal virtue of prose is justice." Quiller-Couch offers an improvement upon this unquestionably worthy nineteenth-century definition: "I should prefer 'a high compelling emotion' to Mr. Clutton-Brock's 'Love,' however widely interpreted, as the virtue of Poetry; and Persuasion rather than Justice as the first virtue of Prose." Quiller-Couch's gloss certainly has a more contemporary ring. He goes on to offer a further refinement of his definition, this time distinguishing literary prose from the words dashed off in a penny-a-liner: "The Newspaper Press admits to-day a portentous amount of that Jargon, or flaccid writing to which flaccid thought instinctively resorts. But literature, I repeat, is memorable speech, recording memorable thoughts and deeds."

Much memorable speech is to be found in the eight pieces gathered here, but memorable in a different way, perhaps, from what Quiller-Couch had in mind. I should explain that my procedure for research and writing has been to choose a subject that for one reason or another I had some interest in, to immerse myself in books about it, and then to supplement what I had learned from them by arranging extensive interviews with their authors or with people who knew or had known them. In previous centuries, the conversation of notables found its way into the memoirs, journals, and correspondence of their contemporaries, but the notion of formal interviews was unknown. (No one would have thought of interviewing Coleridge, for instance; people simply read his books.) The interview as a method of exploration came into its own in our day, through the explosion of newspapers, magazines, radio, films, and television. Even so, as late as 1960, when I wrote about philosophy (the first piece in this volume), my idea of interviewing philosophers in order to explore their recondite ideas was considered a heretical innovation. In conducting such interviews, and others, whether with the learned or with the unschooled, I tried to become the proverbial fly on the wall. I would arrive without specific questions in mind, and, after some amenities, I would just observe and listen, breaking in only when something said was unclear, and would underline in my mind what seemed to me salient remarks, so that I could later note them down. (I was reluctant even to take notes during an interview—not to mention tape-recording it—for I wanted the talk to be as natural as possible, without any distraction or encumbrance.) Whether a person I interviewed found my method disarming or nerve-racking, its result was that he often told me what was on his mind, rather than what was on my mind. I came away with an impression of the person which, combined with my reading and substantiated by talks with collateral sources, had, I think, lasting value. But, of course, what eventually became a part of my essay was only a fraction of what I had read and heard, because a piece of writing has its own demands and logic.

Prose, like manners and dress, reflects its period, and our period is a democratic, Everyman's informational age, in which anything smacking of tradition, élitism, or pretension is suspect. When authors appear on television, we are apt to warm to them more readily if they wear sweaters and slacks than if they are formally clothed. Even lan-

guage and dress distinctions between the sexes are blurring: men and women are both apt to be called "guys" and tend to favor unisex clothes. In the nineteen-fifties, when I first started reading seriously, my contemporaries and I could surmise from an author's prose style whether the author was male or female—or, rather, there were characteristics of style which we associated with one sex or the other. For instance, in those days everyone would have understood what was meant when the writer James Morris was said to have a feminine style: namely, that his style was lush, ornate, and finely embroidered. As it turned out, he himself felt that he had a female soul trapped in a male body, and in 1973 he underwent a sex change. (If one now looks up James Morris in the British *Who's Who*, the entry reads, "MORRIS, James; see Morris, Jan." Morris is perhaps the first writer to be entered under both a real male and a real female name.) The dual nature of Morris's identity may have been a harbinger of new literary trends, in which the yin and yang of yesteryear merge into one uniform—or, rather, unisex—style. Today, if I read an article without noting the author's name I often can't tell whether it was written by a man or a woman. Now that everyone is supposed to be like everyone else, and distinctions not only of sex but of degree and quality are blurred, any attempt at formal prose is hazardous. Indeed, the writing by contemporary authors which I read nowadays, with some possible exceptions, such as John Updike, is not set apart from conversational English. But this may not necessarily be a loss. Contemporary prose has an immediacy and a punchiness that reflect the fast-paced, technological character of our burgeoning mass culture. Ours is an age of supposedly "telling it like it is."

It would be difficult for me to characterize my own style or to place it in any particular tradition. If in my writing I sometimes come across as a bolder person than I actually am, that is because, like other writers, I freely adopt a persona as a way of organizing and presenting my material. Exactly what the persona is may frequently depend on the personalities of the people I am dealing with. For the rest, I keep in the forefront of my mind something that Bertrand Russell told me when I was working on the first piece in this volume. (I can't resist the temptation of recalling it here, even though the reader will come upon it again in the text.) Russell said that as a young man he wrote with

difficulty—that he could recall having to revise his prose as many as ten times—and that he had developed his style by studying two models: Milton's prose and Baedeker's guidebooks. The Puritan never wrote without passion, he explained, and the cicerone used only a few words in recommending sights, hotels, and restaurants: passion was the voice of reason, economy the signature of brilliance. However prose is defined—as Russell's passionate "reason," as Clutton-Brock's "justice," or as Quiller-Couch's "persuasion"—economy of thought and language certainly makes it memorable, thereby according it the status of lasting literature.