

Introduction: “Assaying” the (Post-)Modern Essay

James S. Baumlin and Craig A. Meyer

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For a faculty of wise interrogating is half a knowledge.

—Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (1605)

Dating back to Plato (and surviving in several versions), the above aphorism can guide us still: “Right questioning”—to put it in more modern parlance—“is half an answer.” In his *Advancement of Learning* (1605),¹ Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626) divides scholarly discourse into two “method[s] of tradition” or transmission, “whereof the one may be termed magistral, and the other of probation.” Reforming scholarly invention and communication, Bacon treats the latter as antidote to the former:

For as knowledges are now delivered, there is a kind of contract of error between the deliverer and the receiver. For he that delivereth knowledge desireth to deliver it *in such form as may be best believed, and not as may be best examined*; and he that receiveth knowledge desireth rather present satisfaction than expectant inquiry; and so rather not to doubt, than not to err: glory making the author not to lay open his weakness, and sloth making the disciple not to know his strength. (*Advancement*; emphasis added)

Whereas the magistral method “is designed to teach what one already knows and get the belief of audience,” the probative “seeks to stimulate further inquiry and to advance knowledge” (Stephens 70). At the heart of Bacon’s reform of scholarly-scientific communication stands the essay genre and its predominant rhetorical scheme, the aphorism.² “[F]or aphorisms,” writes Bacon,

cannot be made but of the pith and heart of sciences; for discourse of illustration is cut off; recitals of examples are cut off; discourse of connection and order is cut off; descriptions of practice are cut off. So there remaineth nothing to fill the

¹Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning and Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*, along with his other prominent works, were republished in 1996 within a larger anthology, titled *Francis Bacon: The Major Works*, edited by Brian Vickers. All references to Bacon’s works within this piece have been taken from this anthology.

²In its general, “literary” use, an aphorism is “any principle or precept expressed in few words; a short pithy sentence containing a truth of general import; a maxim” (“Aphorism,” n.2). As a scheme of rhetoric, an aphorism resembles both the maxim and axiom in being “a general observation from experience” (“Axiom,” n.1b).

aphorisms but some good quantity of observation; and therefore no man can suffice, nor in reason will attempt, to write aphorisms, but he that is sound and grounded. [...] And lastly, aphorisms, representing a knowledge broken, *do invite men to inquire further*; whereas [magistral] methods, carrying the show of a total, do secure men, as if they were at furthest. (*Advancement*; emphasis added)

Thus “knowledge, while [...] in aphorisms and observations [...] is in growth” (*Advancement*).

In genre, the English philosopher of rhetoric is influenced by the French Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), whose *Essais* (1580) offered an innovative, distinctively *modern* way of exploratory writing, one aiming not to educate or persuade, but rather to reveal a mind at work: “I am myself the subject matter of my book,” writes Montaigne. Translated as “attempts” or “tests,” Montaigne’s French title suggested Bacon’s own *Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall* (1597, 1625), though the cognate term “essay” might have served Bacon as well (or perhaps better, given the subsequent genealogy of “essay” in English). To assay—to try, to test or attempt, “to put to the proof” (“Assay,” v.1a)—was Bacon’s probative aim in writing. In scholarship today, paradoxically, the essay genre has turned largely magistral, if not in aim (that is, in teaching “what one already knows”) then in its striving for certainty. (“In conclusion”: might that be the modern scholarly essayist’s favorite phrase?) In pursuing its fullness of analysis and argument, the contemporary essay seeks “closure,” whereas an aphoristic style seeks “openness” and tentativeness, inviting readers to join in the inquiry.

Returning to that original, probative meaning of essay/assay, the brief texts that follow stand as supplement to this present special issue, “Telling Life Stories: Ethos, Positionality, and Structures of Narrative.” While offering considerable flexibility in rhetoric and structure, the contemporary scholarly essay cannot easily accommodate the full range of thought and expression regarding life-writing and narrative scholarship. The relative impersonality of academic discourse leaves us silent regarding the personal commitments, aims, and aspirations—in a word, the motives—of our writing. (Focusing on the impersonal “what” of scholarship, we often neglect the “how” and, even more so, the personal “why.”) Often, our ideas remain half-formed, needing others to help think them. The rigors of academic writing curtail speculation; an author’s “perhaps” seems to lack cogency or conviction, and questions without answers are only rarely deemed publishable. Academic publishing has long sought to police the boundaries between scholarly and creative writing, favoring some structures and styles while suspecting others. But the nature of life stories—the broad subject of this special issue—invites us to reconsider the ways that authors inscribe themselves into their texts. This ethotic insight holds for all writing, whether scholarly, literary, or speculative.

Presenting “fragments of knowledge,” Bacon’s aphoristic method “invites receivers to contribute” (Stephens 70) to their expansion and completion. Several of the following forum contributors pursue this same Baconian project, offering starting points for others’ work. Several take a stand on topics relating to narrative and cultural ethos; their texts offer mission statements, as it were, for the sorts of projects that they pursue. Several take this forum to position themselves within their research and teaching, as if their own ethos were “under assay.” Several take this forum to experiment in style and

structure. They (re)consider narratives, stories, theories, and writings in ways that go beyond the boundaries of “the formal and scholarly.” Yet, they *are* scholarly; they are curious; they are engaging; they are thoughtful. Many ask questions, acknowledging (in Baconian manner) that “right questioning is half an answer.” At the same time, we know that questions of intellectual or existential import are rarely definitively “answered” but are always, rather, infinitely “answerable.” Above all, the contributors to this forum show their commitment to scholarship as a community with its own unfolding stories.

Life stories make us who we are, help us understand our positionality, and help us appreciate our journey. Discussions about our respective narratives help us better understand each other and the paths and patterns of our uniqueness. These discussions are not happening enough, however, and we need to immerse ourselves in empathetic and ethotic engagement with other people’s narratives. It is through mutual understanding and recognition of our ethotic experiences that we more deeply connect to the things that make us human. Learning to listen, we celebrate commonalities and honor differences. We learn *to know* the “other” as an extension of self, not “*apart from*” us but “*a part of*” us. Arguably, our collective future depends on this sharing.



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