



# ESSAY (ISM)

# Virginia Woolf: The Death of The Moth

- The list of topics the great essayists have addressed: the death of a moth (Virginia Woolf), falling off a horse (Montaigne), an inventory of the objects on one's desk (Georges Perec).
- The art of observing everything in every place.
- The grandest wonders of the most mundane things.
- Open ended quest for meaning(fulness). Totality is not the aim. Partial, personal, embodied---situated knowing, observing, connecting to meanings, creating connections. Trying to connect to “the halo of affinities and correspondences” (Woolf).

Exercise #1 Reading together.  
Listening to the TONES, the VOICE of the  
writer.

Virginia Woolf: *The Death of the Moth*  
(1942)

## Exercise #2:

### “...the halo of affinities and correspondences...”

- Walk around the campus, choose a mundane “thing”, entity, object, space, place...

- Think about about “it” by writing, write about “it” by thinking,

describing, pondering, looking from different angles, thinking what “it” is, what “it” relates to, what “it” brings to your mind...

breath in, think, try to find words, tactile, sensuous, tangible...metaphoric, concrete, abstract, poetic...

...try to think about the meaning of this “thing”, what kind of connections you can recognize.

- Let this pondering, observing, probing, feeling, thinking, take you wherever you end up getting.

- Write like Woolf writes about the dying moth. Try to connect to “the halo of affinities and correspondences” (Woolf)

# ESSAY(ISM)

- Etymology in French “essayer” “to try”, “to attempt”
- “*Essayer*” derives from Latin word *exagiare* which signifies “to weigh”. Latin word *Exagium*= scale
- Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), French Renaissance politician and writer, first to coin the term *essai*.
- Philosopher and writer Aldous Huxleys (e.g. *Brave New World* 1932) defined “three poles” of essays:
  - The personal and the autobiographical: writing with fragments of reflective autobiography, autobiographical anecdotes.
  - The objective, the factual, and the concrete: essayists not writing of themselves, but on some literary, scientific or political theme.
  - The abstract-universal: expression of high abstractions, philosophical essays.
  - **THE BEST ARE A COMBINATION OF ALL THREE OF THESE.**

Brian Dillon: *Essayism: On Form, Feeling, and Nonfiction*.

- Essayists “perform a combination of exactitude and evasion that seems to me to define what writing ought to be.”
- “I was and remain quite incapable of mounting in writing a reasoned and coherent argument, never mind describing to myself, as the study of logic required, the parts and processes, more or less persuasive, of that argument.”
- He defines essay as “a form that would instruct, seduce and mystify in equal measure.”
- “An essay tells the truth, but it tells it “slantwise”, with a difference – sometimes subtle, sometimes extreme.”

- “The essays that he most admires are those “that pay the minutest or most sustained attention to one thing, one time or place, one strain or strand of existence. An essay that performs its mode of attention [...]”
- “The essay is diverse and several — it *teems*. But of course it also *tries* — and gives up.”

“The genre can and must be heterogeneous and strange to itself, but its variety and its **capaciousness do not mean that it lacks shape**. Erudition or learning is one of the things the essay will frequently contain, but 'in an essay it must be so fused by the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of the texture' [Virginia Woolf]. Essays are intact and seamless and well-made - except when they are not, when they fracture and fail and open themselves up to the possibility that they will not please.”



“A **certain lightness is essential to the form**, and lightness has had a bad reputation, even though its adherents have included such writers as Oscar Wilde, Italo Calvino, Georges Perec.

In 1958, in 'The Essay as Form', Theodor Adorno described some of the common complaints against the essay - **its lack of method, its failure to be comprehensive, the absence in it of original concepts - and defended the genre on all the same counts**. The essayist, he writes, does not feel the need to say all that can be said on a subject, and is content to use concepts that already exist in philosophy. Here is Adorno on the essay's refusal of method:

‘Doubt about the unconditional priority of method was raised, in the actual process of thought, almost exclusively by the essay. It does justice to the consciousness of non-identity, without needing to say so, radically non-radical in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in accentuating the fragmentary, the partial rather than the total.’

And on the essay's attitude to the **passing** and the **permanent**:

‘The usual reproach against the essay, that it is **fragmentary** and **random**, itself assumes the givenness of totality and thereby the identity of subject and object, and it suggests that man is in control of totality. **But the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal.**’

# The way of moving around and looking at things with words, sentences.

- Embodied or *relational* writing: even if the writing aims at abstraction, you can recognize the subject, the one who writes, thinks, ponders

## Sense of movement (towards and away, pausing to ponder a detail and jumping

- to wander AS WELL AS to stay
- To approach (a proposition) AS WELL AS to depart (to distance, to refuse)

## Sense of relation:

- To ponder AS WELL AS to discard
- To reveal AS WELL as to conceal
- To attempt to comprehend but never claiming for the totality of the meaning.
- Materiality of language.
- Tonality of language.

# Writing exercise #3 INVENTORY OF THINGS THAT MATTER

- WRITE DOWN (BY HAND) A LIST OF “THINGS” (concepts, ideas, methods, artistic ideas etc.) THAT MATTER THE MOST IN YOUR WORK (IN YOUR ARTISTIC RESEARCH, ART MAKING, YOUR DOCTORAL THESIS).

- LOOK AT THIS LIST, CHOOSE ONE:

- Think about about “it” by writing, write about “it” by thinking:

describing, pondering, looking from different angles, thinking what “it” is, what “it” relates to, what “it” brings to your mind...

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