The Best Australian Essays: locating the contemporary Australian essay

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Abstract

The annual publication of Black Inc's *The Best Australian Essays* over the past decade can be seen as part of a rising trend in which the essay genre, in this country, has become more visible, and arguably therefore, more popular among the reading public. The current cultural value placed on the essay, as a social text, is an interesting one, but one that must be considered within the context of a history of the genre: a history that is complex, revealing often conflicting positions on nomenclature, appropriation, and purpose. A publication such as *The Best Australian Essays* is, therefore, necessarily associated with the genre's history, and also, with an equally complex Australian literary history. To date no research has sought to locate the contemporary Australian essay within the context of these histories.

The Best Australian Essays is positioned in this project as a useful measure of the contemporary Australian essay. It is argued that because the anthologies are published annually; because they are influenced by the varied approaches and observations of the four respective editors; and because they present selections from a broad range of publications; that the individual anthologies, and series as a whole, showcase the kind and range of essays currently written, and read, in Australia.

The notion of "best" essays is ultimately a gimmick, a marketing tool – following unashamedly *The Best American Essays* in the US. However, and importantly, *The Best Australian Essays* does seek to publish exemplary essay writing, and the editors do attempt to engage, some more enthusiastically than others, in a dialogue about the genre in this country. Somewhat unintentionally then, the label "best" parallels a dominant theme running through theoretical examinations of the essay. Theories of the essay reveal a consistent tendency toward the explication of a *best* practice ideal, or utopian kind of essay text. Naturally, these explications are sites of divergent opinion and dispute, particularly given that theory and practice in the essay can often be disparate.

This project, in mapping the contemporary Australian essay, seeks to expand the dialogue beyond the useful, though limiting, utopian theories of the essay. Here a close analysis of *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008 collections, and individual essays within the anthologies, is presented. The framework for analysis utilises a "new rhetorics" and contemporary genre analysis approach. The analysis is, therefore, simultaneously local, context specific, far-reaching and multidisciplinary; presenting a comprehensive picture of the current essaying modes in this country, and revealing that the essay in Australia is appropriated in a multiplicity of ways. As such, a dialogue limited to notions of a utopian ideal is not appropriate for discussing meaningfully the practice of essay writing in Australia, at this time. Rather, it is argued that in considering the kinds of sub-genres that fall under the umbrella of *essay*, and the role of these sub-genres, a dialogue about the genre can be more soundly articulated and positions more clearly defined.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university and that to the best of my knowledge it does not contain any materials previously published or written by any other person except where due reference is made in the text.



Kari Adams

Acknowledgements

This sojourn began in 2002 when my eldest daughter, now eight, was a mere six months old. Since then my husband and I have welcomed two more children into the world, we have lived in six different houses – one of which we built – in three different countries. Not surprisingly, therefore, my experience as a research candidate has been a little unconventional, and the presentation of this thesis has only been possible with an enormous amount of support and encouragement from family, friends and colleagues.

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Introduction

In 1998, the first in a series of annual essay anthologies was published under the seemingly simple and highly marketable title *The Best Australian Essays*. The series, at the time of writing, now eleven years old and heading into its twelfth year of publication has proven to be commercially successful and, perhaps as a result of this, offers significant insight into the contemporary essay in Australia.

The Best Australian Essays is an anthology of selected essays, sourced predominantly from Australian newspapers and literary magazines, within a twelve-month editorial timeframe. Since the edition was first published, four editors have been responsible for the selection and compilation of the anthologies: Peter Craven 1998-2003, Robert Dessaix 2004-2005, Drusilla Modjeska 2006-2007, David Marr 2008. Marr is also the editor for the 2009 edition.[1] The notions of 'best' and 'essay' are, therefore, at the discretion of each editor. Though the selections are based on the judgement of one individual, we can reasonably assign what Swales (1990) calls 'genre-expertise' to the editors, based on their professional credentials in writing and literature. Peter Craven is a well known, though sometimes controversial, literary critic; both Robert Dessaix and Drusilla Modjeska are writers, essayists and former academics; and David Marr is a writer, essayist, journalist and former presenter of the ABC's *Media Watch*.

The Best Australian Essays is published by Black Inc, an imprint of Schwatrz Publishing. Black Inc also publishes relative newcomers to the Australian literary magazine scene, *Quarterly Essay* (2001) and *The Monthly* (2005). Though not indicated by its title, *The Monthly*, like *Quarterly Essay* and *The Best Australian Essays*, is highly concerned with the essay, and since its inception it has been the key source of essays for *The Best Australian Essays*.

[1] Due to the timing of the publication of *The Best Australian Essays 2009* and the submission of this project for examination, this edition will not be included in the analysis that follows.

Owner of Black Inc, Morry Schwartz, is somewhat dismissive of the role the publisher has played in the promotion and popularisation of the essay in Australia, commenting that 'we're not making the culture, we're simply following it' (in Crawford 2005, p.4). Schwartz is a proven, savvy businessman, who clearly saw in the essay a commercial opportunity – a culture willing and ready to accept the essay "project". Yet to suggest that Black Inc is simply following the culture is, arguably, to undervalue the role the publisher has played in helping to reinvigorate an apparently ailing genre, by re-branding it – as sexy, timely and topical literature – and thus influencing the genre, and to that degree, the culture which it reflects and within which it is consumed.

While proponents of the essay can certainly be found in writing and publishing in Australia prior to 1998, in the last decade the essay in this country has arguably become more visible and more popular. This is seen in the increased numbers of publications now *naming* the genre, in titles or contents pages: for example, *Griffith Review*, *Australian Book Review (ABR)*, *The Monthly*, *Quarterly Essay*, *The Best Australian Essays*, and *Meanjin*. Similarly, discussions of the essay can be found not only in literary magazines, but also in the national broadsheets[2] and in sessions at literary festivals. *ABR*, apparently recognising the importance and popularity of the essay at this juncture, introduced the annual Calibre Prize for an Outstanding Essay in 2006. The winning essays are published in *ABR* and the essayists receive $1000 for their efforts.

The increasing prominence of the essay in contemporary Australian writing and publishing seems to beg the questions: What is the contemporary Australian essay? How might it be defined? Indeed, can it be defined? What might we say about it? In this project, '*The Best Australian Essays*: locating the contemporary Australian essay', I have set out with the objective of mapping the contemporary Australian essay using *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008 series as a vehicle for evaluating and examining

[2] See for example, Gruber, Fiona 2008, 'Celebrity writers try out big ideas', *Weekend Australian*, Review, July19-20, p 12; Carey Gabrielle 2008, 'Narcissistic navel gazing? I think not', *The Australian Literary Review*, March 5, p. 14; Ley, James 2008, 'All stuffiness? Nonsense', *Australian Literary Review*, July 2, p. 24.

the essay as it is published in the Australian context. The close examination undertaken here is focussed on the 2000-2008 editions – the beginning of the new millennium seeming a rather fitting place from which to embark upon an examination concerned with notions of the 'contemporary'.[3] Importantly, the map presented here is considered as a map, not the map, of the contemporary Australian essay, an acknowledgement that, as contemporary literary theory shows, understandings and interpretations of texts are necessarily plural and highly subjective. This map then is not definitive or complete; it is, however, a valuable and overdue addition to relatively scant body of work on the essay genre in the Australian context.

The Best Australian Essays is positioned in this project as the central subject of analysis. No other publication in Australia has sought out from multiple sources, considered, and presented exemplars of the Australian essay so consistently and over such a period of time. Thus, while The Best Australian Essays is just one publication concerned with the essay genre, the essay is its sole concern (unlike, for example, literary magazines and newspapers that publish essays), and as a series, it is the only one of its kind in Australia. It is, therefore, considered that *The Best Australian Essays* is representative of, and influential on, the contemporary Australian essay 'scene', and as such, provides a highly suitable framework around which a map of the contemporary Australian essay can be formed.[4] It is my premise that *The Best Australian Essays* is a useful medium for explicating the way the essay is appropriated in Australia, given that the essays are sourced from a cross section of national publications;[5] the series publishes a wide range of essayists, 194 in total; and the essays are located within a specific and identifiable timeframe. Furthermore, the change in editors in 2004, 2006 and 2008 reveals idiosyncratic positions on the essay, positions reflected in the kinds of anthologies compiled by Craven, Dessaix, Modjeska and Marr. In this sense, *The Best Australian Essays*, can be seen to be a flexible, mixed series, much like the contemporary versions of the genre it claims to showcase.

[3] This is a metaphorical position and notions of the contemporary are *not* restricted in the project to post-2000.
[4] While this project is centred on *The Best Australian Essays* series, other publications showcasing the essay are examined.
[5] Arguably, this cross section has diminished somewhat as *The Monthly*, since 2005, has become the predominant source of essays in the series.

The discussion above indicates that there has been a change in the perceived nature and value of the essay in Australia. To understand what this might mean, we need to look to the history of the genre. To date, no academic study has sought to contextualise the contemporary Australian essay within a history of the genre, nor the national literary and cultural history in which it is produced. A notion of a national essay, therefore, sits within a four-hundred-year history of the essay genre, and a comparatively short one hundred-plus-year history of Australian literature, publishing and essay writing. These "histories" are also necessarily linked to a body of theoretical work on the essay, and reading, writing and texts, more broadly, which must underpin any scholarly consideration of the essay text.

In 1580 the French nobleman, Michel de Montaigne, published the first of a collection of written works; they were relatively short pieces, intimate, personal,[6] tentative, open and highly sceptical of traditional discourse structures, cognitive form, and hegemonic ideals within the text. He named his texts '*Essais*', 'trials' or 'attempts', (Lopate 1999), and in doing so, the essay as a textual mode came into being. Though the scepticism apparent in Montaigne's essays reveals an ambitious and indeed highly influential project, he surely could not have imagined that more than four centuries on, the possibilities of the 'essay' would continue to spark debate – debate about definitions, appropriations and theories of the form.

Not long after Montaigne's *Essais* were published, and their English translations became well-known across the Channel, the English themselves took up the essay, generating and manipulating the textual form into a different set of cultural practices and expectations. While the essay in the Montaignean tradition continued to flourish in various forms and to varying degrees, so too other kinds of essays, most notably the formal essay, appeared. From very early on then, the essay has been taken to mean, at least in practice, many different things – hence, flexibility in the essay has

[6] Lopate (1995) views the essays of Book One to be 'relatively impersonal' (p. 44) suggesting that the notion of 'self-study' came after the success of his first published *Essais*. Ultimately however, the exploration of the personal was to become Montaigne's mission.

come to be considered a defining feature of the genre. Importantly, however, this notion of flexibility is almost always contextualised into a utopian framework – a delineation of what the essay ought be, in terms of form and function,[7] and how these might ideally be achieved. Ultimately, a definition as to what constitutes the essay has, despite utopian ideals, taken on a more postmodern/poststructuralist position – one that is highly context specific, unfixed and almost always in dispute – both in theory and practice.

As intimated above, there has been a consistent tendency over the past century, in the theoretical and ideological framing of the essay, to conceive the genre in quite particular 'utopian' or 'ideal' terms. Such conceptions posit the 'utopian' essay as something necessarily heroic[8] in uncertain times – as the textual mode *par excellence* to remedy all that is ostensibly troubling in other more traditional discourse structures – the implication being that these discourses are themselves, symptomatic of "troubling times". The essay, the dominant position suggests, *should be* personal, intimate, conversational, and, therefore, involving of the reader in the exchange of meaning and ideas. It is an openly subjective mode, tentative, and unfixed. This stands in opposition to those discourse structures which set up the act of cognition, the process of information dissemination, as one-sided, objective, impersonal, formal, closed and fixed. For proponents of the utopian essay, and indeed for literary theory since postmodernism and poststructuralism, these latter assumptions about traditional discourse structures – 'grand narratives' such as science, academia, and journalism – are inherently flawed. Any notion of the 'utopian' essay therefore, in theory, strives to offer something of a more honest presentation of the cognitive and communicative act.

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[7] A notion of a utopian framework borrows from the Montaignian essay tradition -- intimate, personal, tentative, open and highly sceptical. We see a preferencing for this kind of essay by scholars such as Holdheim (1984), Lopate (1995 & 1999), and Heilker (1996); and *The Best Australian Essays* editors Craven (2000), Dessaix (2004) and Modjeska (2006). However, notions of the utopian essay are further examined in Chapter 2 in the context of the philosophical theories on the essay developed by Lukács (1910) and Adorno (1958) who both saw in the premise of an 'ideal' essay great cognitive and political potential.

[8] See Chapter 2, 'Further definitions: theoretical framing of the nature and form of the essay' for an overview of notable theoretical positions on the essay.

What we see in the Australian context, however, is substantial variety in the kinds of writing positioned under the nomenclature of 'essay'. This variation, while hinting at the flexibility of form inherent in the essay, also opens up questions as to how we consider those examples of the essay which seemingly stray, sometimes markedly, from the utopian ideal.[9] The primary concern of this project is identifying, evaluating and positioning the most visible essays in Australia, recognising that theories of the essay, specifically those constrained by their utopian ideals, are alone not sufficient to analyse critically the contemporary Australian essay represented in *The Best Australian Essays*. This task should be viewed as pluralistic: it is concerned with the variety of essays published in contemporary Australia, not with determining a definitive kind of essay. This is a premise in keeping with literature on the genre, as discussed in the following chapter.

The close analysis of *The Best Australian Essays* presented in this project is divided into two inherently linked parts. Firstly, the series is examined in the context of the anthologies each editor has compiled. I consider the editor's positions on the essay, the original publications from which the essays were sourced, and the kinds of essay each has published. Secondly, as a means of explicating the way the essay is appropriated in Australia, I undertake a rhetorical analysis of sample essays from the collections. These analyses are necessarily located within the context of the historical, theoretical, national and cultural backdrop of notions of the essay; and further, notions of the *Australian* essay.

This thesis comprises five parts: Part I – History, theory and definitions of the essay; Part II – Approaching the text; Part III – Literature and the essay in Australia; Part IV – Textual analysis: *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies 2000-2008; and Part V – Final notes.

[9] I do not want to diminish the potential of the 'utopian' essay and therefore inadvertently promote a sense of mediocrity in the genre. Certainly there is great value in striving for excellence within utopian notions of the form. However, I am cautious that the promotion of a utopian ideal has the simultaneous effect of rendering all texts that fall outside of this ideal as less valuable. There is a risk then that such views render the essay closed, fixed, and hegemonic by the nature of its exclusionary profile. The result of this is that we are then left with no framework to examine meaningfully non-utopian examples of the essay.

Part I, Chapter 1, provides an overview of the documented history of the essay, beginning with Montaigne in 1580 and then moving onto the developmental shifts seen in the English appropriations of the essay from the seventeenth-century to the beginning of the twentieth-century. In this chapter the essay in twentieth-century America, and the more recent discussions of a 'creative nonfiction', (a genre and umbrella term under which some appropriations of the essay falls) is also considered. The discussions of creative nonfiction take on a distinctly theoretical and ideological position, offering new ways to consider particular examples of the essay. What becomes clear in these discussions, however, is that theories of creative nonfiction, the so-called 'fourth genre' (Root & Steinberg 2001), despite adding a valuable and new element to the role of personal writing across multiple disciplines, are unable to deal meaningfully with a sizable number of non-personal essays published in *The Best Australian Essays*.

In Part I, Chapter 2, the theoretical conversation is carried through into other philosophical positions on the essay: those of Lukács (1910), Adorno (1958), and Huxley (1959); the more recent scholarly work of Bensmaïa (1987) on the Montaignean project and Barthes' "writerly text"; and finally, Mowitt (1989), and Joeres and Mittman's (1993) feminist perspectives on the essay are examined. Together, Chapters 1 and 2 delineate a theoretical and applied history of the essay. As suggested earlier, however, the theoretical positions on the essay, though providing significant tools for understanding, interpreting and using the essay, do so in terms that are specific to particular utopian ideals of the text – personal, intimate, sceptical, worldly, informed and political. Thus, while the examinations of such historical and theoretical positions helps to ensure that we do not 'reify' the essay (Kauffmann 1981), as a concrete fixed thing, it is argued that to avoid this situation, particularly in the context of *The Best Australian Essays*, the conversation and analysis must extend to more holistic methods of textual analysis. In this way, we are able to bring together the sometimes-disparate realities of theory and practice.

Part II, Chapter 3, begins with an examination of the role of the reader in the textual transaction – a discussion absent in the early works on the essay by Lukács (1910) and

Adorno (1958). Rosenblatt's (1978) work on aesthetic and efferent reading offers a means for examining literary pleasure (as internal to the text, pleasure upon reading) and didactic action (external to the text, as action post-reading) suggested by particular markers and elements within individual texts. While the text is suggestive of a particular type of reading, it is the reader and the context of reading that will ultimately determine the outcome of the reading act, Rosenblatt argues. Here also, Iser's (1978) theory of reading and texts, which coalesces usefully with the work of Rosenblatt, is examined. Iser views the reading act as transactional, suggesting that meaning 'happens' at the point of reading; it is not inherent in the text. What is particularly significant about Iser's work, for this project, is his premise that the text can only offer a map but can never be the 'embodiment of an ideal standard' (1978, p. 23). I argue that these theories are important to this project because they suggest that while a text might offer up a utopian readerly experience (of aesthetics, ethics and cognition), the reader also plays a role in determining how much of this 'reading utopia' is actually realised. Thus while the theories of the essay examined in Chapter 2 suggest something of the potential of the utopian essay text, they are *only* theories and in the end they fail to account adequately for the role of the reader.

Following on from the discussion of readers, this chapter then moves on to consider rhetoric and genre as valuable methodological approaches to textual analysis. The "new rhetorics" approach to textual analysis is examined in the frameworks set out by Berlin (1993) and Fulkerson (1993). Furthermore, Hesse's (1989) position on narrative and rhetoric is examined as it relates to the essay broadly and this project specifically. Having argued for the value of a rhetorical framework for analysis, the work of Swales (1990), Freedman and Medway (1994), and Miller (1994) on genre is examined. Swales's and Miller's methods for defining and evaluating genre are particularly useful, and significantly inform *The Best Australian Essays* analyses in Chapter 5. Swales's and Miller's work on genre is highly important to this project because it gives legitimacy to the task of genre analysis – here of the essay – and provides a method for analysing and legitimising instances of genre that seemingly fall outside of the theorised utopian essay, but still remain within the genre code.

Contemporary rhetoric and genre analysis is centred on notions of writing and text production. Both forms of analysis are able to accommodate a multidisciplinary approach, but do call for an examination of the micro and macro elements at work within the text; the kind of examination that engages with, Andrews (1992) suggests, 'the arts of discourse' and 'context' (p.5).

In Part III, Chapter 4, the focus of the project shifts to the Australian scene, positioning the essay within a specific set of cultural, historical and theoretical contexts. The first section of this chapter begins with the discussions of Davis (1999) and Carter (2001) on the status of the contemporary Australian essay. Davis and Carter share a number of concerns about the role of the essay, as a performative genre, in our contemporary consumer society, and the intentions of 'coterie liberalism' – or, rather, particular members of this coterie – in reinvigorating the essay as the "quintessential" social text. An examination of Armstrong (2000) on aesthetics, Kirklighter (2002) on the democratic potential of the essay, and Anderson (1991) and Fairclough (1995) on the social nature of texts adds further insights and alternative views to the arguments of Davis and Carter.

In the second section of this chapter the Australian essay is considered in the context of Australia's print culture and the development of notions of an Australian literary canon; the resulting introduction of the literary periodical; and the beginning of a professional split between the academy and the "amateurs" over authority and power of the canon – its inclusions, exclusions, conversations, direction, and so forth. The positioning of the Australian essay within a broader publishing and cultural context highlights the significance of the essay as a social text – one influenced by, and influencing, the culture in which it circulates. These broader historical conversations are important to the project because the essay and its status are inherently linked to the development of Australian writing, publishing and literature.

Part IV, Chapter 5, is concerned with the close analysis of *The Best Australian Essays*. This analysis begins with an examination of the editors' claims for the collections and

the genre. The introductions of Craven 1998-2003,[10] Dessaix 2004-2005, Modjeska 2006-2007, and Marr 2008 show the divergent, though arguably not entirely dissimilar, viewpoints on the essay. In these introductory essays, the reader and critic are able to discern the engagement of each editor with the genre, and the series – their objectives, preferences, concerns, and concessions. From here the kinds of anthology produced by each of the editors is examined in view of their sources of selected essays and essayists published. The examination of *The Best Australian Essays* series can therefore be viewed as the 'macro' textual analysis undertaken in this project.

In this chapter the categories, or sub-genres, of essays identified in the collections, utilising Swales's (1990) definitional cluster approach, are presented and examined. Six sub-genres have been identified – personal essays, literary reportage, critical essays, politically radical essays, science/nature/travel essays, and auto/biographical essays. One essay from each category is analysed here, with the exception of the critical essay for which two essays are analysed. These analyses are centred on the rhetorical devices at work in the essays, but also consider other significant elements, to differing degrees and where appropriate, such as history, theory, and the Australian cultural/literary landscapes, as examined in earlier chapters. In contrast to the analysis of the series outlined above, the examination of the individual essays within the anthologies is positioned here as the 'micro' element of the textual analysis work undertaken in this project.

Part V, Chapter 6, offers the final notes on this project. This chapter considers the territory covered in earlier chapters, and presents possibilities for further research. Necessarily, Chapter 6 'Final contemplations and ruminations on the contemporary Australian essay' concludes with some observations about the status of the contemporary Australian essay, and offers some ideas for a continuing dialogue about the essay in Australia – one which is able to offer meaningful examination and debate on a range of essay types, not one restricted to fixed notions of an ideal.

[10] The introduction to all editions edited by Craven are examined, although only the collections from 2000-2003 are considered in the close analysis.

Having discussed the aims, objectives, scope and framework of this project, Figure 1 maps the relationship between *The Best Australian Essays* and the histories, theories, methodologies of analysis, and cultural position(s) of the essay presented and examined in this project. *The Best Australian Essays* are the core texts and central subject matter of this project. In this figure we can see that the history of the essay, theories of the essay, and methodological approaches to textual analysis are linked directly to the individual essays within the anthologies – these elements significantly determine how the essays are understood within the context of this project. The reading of the essays within *The Best Australian Essays* determines how the series as a whole is to be viewed as a measure of the contemporary Australian essay, a social text located within the institutional and cultural context of Australian literary publishing. Importantly, the contextual positioning of *The Best Australian Essays* series also informs a reading of the essays and the relationships between these institutions, cultural/social positions. The dynamic between the series and its essays is necessarily two-way: these elements, the macro and the micro, are simultaneously influenced by and influence each other.

Notions of a macro and micro approach to analysis underpin the purposefully eclectic methodological framework applied in this project; one in keeping with a "new rhetorics" approach and contemporary understandings of genre analysis. Such approaches enable the text(s) to be examined utilising a multiplicity of "positions" or "ways into" the texts. Importantly, the individual analyses are intended to be read, not as stand alone examples of "literary criticism" but, rather, as the micro element at work in this project. As such these analyses serve to illustrate the broad map of the essays represented in *The Best Australian Essays*: they are examples of the ways in which the contemporary essay are appropriated in this country.

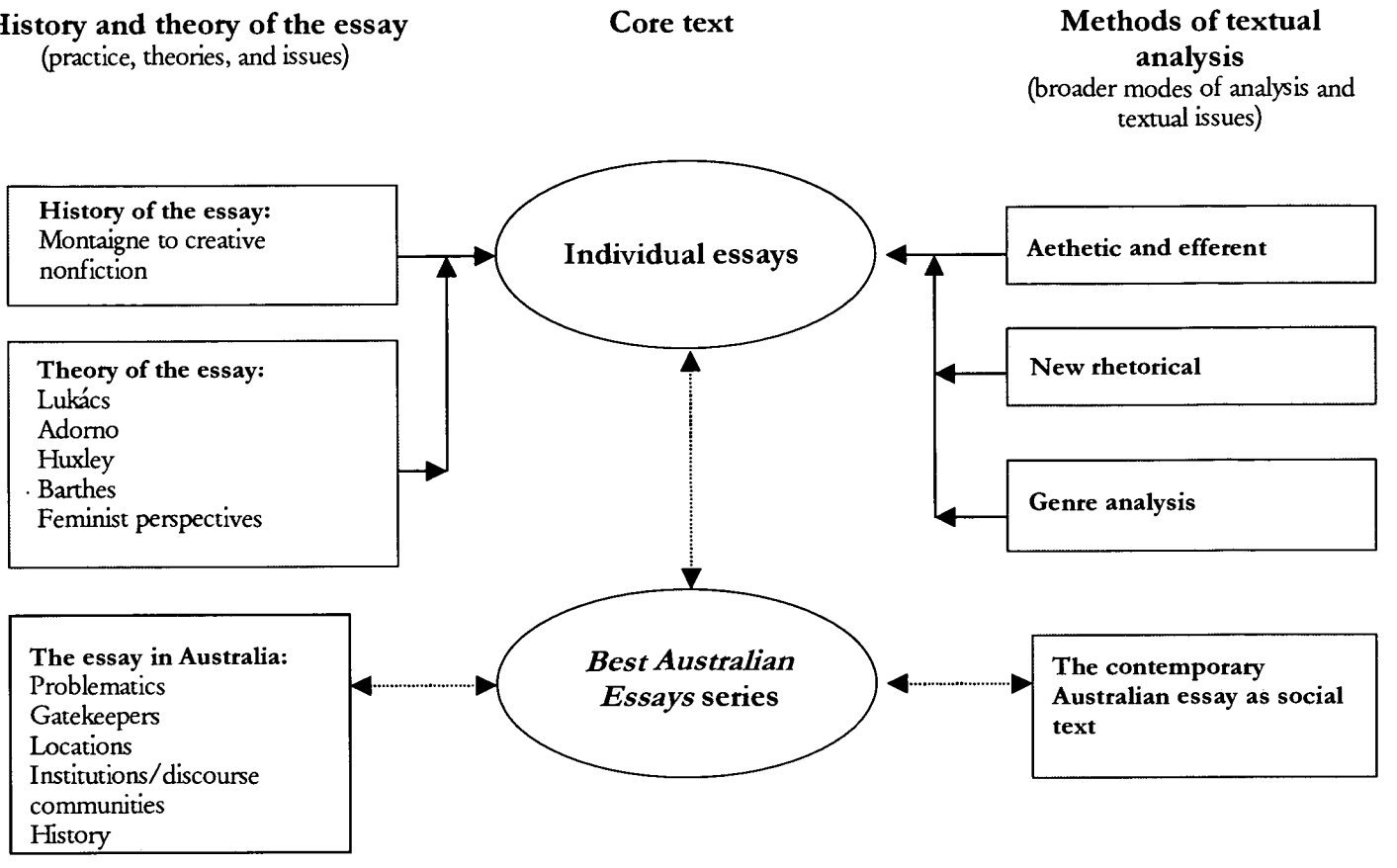


Figure 1 Relationship between *The Best Australian Essays*, histories, theories, methodologies, institutions, and cultural/social positions presented/examined.

Earlier in this introduction, and in the figure above, it has been suggested that to examine the essay meaningfully, in theory and practice, one must also examine the historicity of the genre. I turn now, then, to the father of the essay, Michel de Montaigne, and his groundbreaking work, as I survey the historical origins of the essay and begin to unpack the complexities of nomenclature that began so early on, and carry through to the present day.

Part I

History, theory and definitions of the essay

Chapter 1

A brief history of the essay: from Montaigne to creative nonfiction

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Michel de Montaigne – father of the "*essai*"

Most historical examinations of the essay genre begin either solely, or in the very least substantially, with the 16th century French nobleman Michel de Montaigne. So too, this historical summary will commence in the same way. Some commentators on the essay (Benson 1923, Dobrée 1946, Hardison 1989, Lopate 1999) point to essayistic styling in classic Greek and Roman literature, and suggest that such works strongly influenced Montaigne's writing. However, they do acknowledge that 'it was Michel de Montaigne, generally considered the "father of the essay", who first matched the word to the form around 1580' (Lopate 1999, p. 338), when he published his first collection of essays, rather tellingly entitled *Essais*. *Essai* is French for 'an attempt', and has its origins in the 'Late Latin *exagium*, ultimately from *exigere/exactum* to drive out, try, examine' (McArthur 1992, p. 380). The word *essay* came to be used in the English language in the late sixteenth century (McArthur 1992).

For Lopate (1999), Montaigne's 'trials' or 'attempts' set the benchmark for the genre, taking 'the essay form to its very limits at the outset' (p. 338). Montaigne's mission was, Lopate (1995) suggests, to put forth, in the public domain, 'a verbal portrait of himself' (p. 43). Even today, in a climate in which memoir and biography appear to be more in favour than ever before, such a gesture might be considered somewhat egomaniacal (indeed it would seem that Montaigne was certainly not lacking in ego). Importantly, the impetus and validity for creating such a personal narrative can be seen in Montaigne's assertion that 'each man bears in himself the entire form of the human condition' (Montaigne 1993 , III: 2). On this basis, Lopate (1995) argues that

Montaigne's writing does not lend itself towards solipsism, but rather to the inevitability that such texts will 'strike a chord of grateful recognition in readers everywhere' (p. 44). Indeed, commentators on the essay (Heilker 1996, Holdheim 1984, Lopate 1995, 1999) signal that the essayist's understanding of the self intertwined with something greater, more universal, is a significant and important element in acknowledged exemplars of the genre. In this sense we might then consider that Montaigne set out not only to make sense of his individual life, but the human condition generally, using writing as a means by which his readers might learn more about both themselves and the people around them.

Montaigne's written self-study comprises 117 essays (Montaigne 1993), originally published in three books. Tellingly, these essays still have relevance for readers today – evidenced, at least, by the continued publication of his work and an ongoing dialogue about the attributes of the Montaignean legacy. For Lopate (1999), Montaigne's essays set the measure for excellence and quality of the form because his consciousness – of himself and his subject (often, though not always, one and the same) – is shown to be 'undulatingly supple, learned, sceptical, deep, sane, and candid' (p. 338). Furthermore, Montaigne's style is 'charmingly specific and daily', and he possesses an 'ability to see himself as an average human being' (Lopate 1995, p. 44). These are the qualities which scholars such as Lopate view as fundamental to exemplary personal essay writing.

Like Lopate, Holdheim (1984) argues that 'Montaigne... can be fruitfully set up as a provisional (though not definitive) normative gauge' (p. 19) of the essay form. While one should be cautious about using Montaigne as the sole benchmark by which all texts falling under the rubric of essay might be judged, certainly his oeuvre, and the critiques of his work, provide a useful historical and theoretical context within which a detailed examination of the essay might be formed.

In his book *The Essay*, Heilker (1996) posits two 'generalisations' about the Montaignean essay. First, he asserts that Montaigne's essays are an 'epistemologically skeptical exploration' (p. 20); and second, that such essays are a 'rejection of the

traditional rhetorical norms' (p. 20). Heilker believes that these two generalisations are realised in Montaigne's use of 'chrono-logic' – the organisational structure apparent in Montaigne's essays. Chrono-logic ordering for Heilker is 'an arrangement based on the linearity of time' (p. 23). Thus readers might see that Montaigne's ideas are presented in his writing as they presented themselves to him; his essays follow his line of thought from beginning to end. This notion, which Heilker (1996) believes ultimately determines the structure of the text, is similar to that of Lopate's (1999) understanding that 'Montaigne understood that, in an essay, the track of a person's thoughts struggling to achieve some understanding of a problem *is* the plot' (p. 338).

While Montaigne's essaying as a cognitive action might appear to some to be lacking in rigour in the sense of 'thematic discipline and even logic' (Holdheim 1984, p.20), Heilker (1996) rejects the simplicity of this view (as ultimately does Holdheim), suggesting that while this may *seem* to be true, Montaigne had a clear and obvious purpose, 'the promulgation of radical thinking and writing' (p. 20). Montaigne's essays, writes Holdheim (1984), are involved in

> an active deconstruction in the genuine sense; a clearing away of rubbish, of reified sedimentations, so that issues may once again be laid bare in their concreteness. His radical presentation of discontinuity is very much a reaction against uncritically accepted accumulations of continuity; his insistence on the uniquely diverse and particular is directed against too exclusive a concern with universals. Prior to Montaigne, the self in its infinite modalities had certainly never become visible to this degree. (p. 21)

From this we can read, in Holdheim's view, that Montaigne's primary concern was cognition, with ways of knowing; or rather, with alternative ways of knowing. Montaigne, argues Holdheim (1984), saw that the dominant rhetorical strategies of his time failed to attribute adequate value to lived experience, resulting in a kind of knowledge 'degeneration' (p. 25). As with the notion of the essay encompassing that which is both personal and universal, the essay as an alternative to more formalised discourse has also become a hallmark of the 'ideal' essay.

In considering Montaigne's oeuvre, Holdheim (1984) recognises that a number of apparent contradictions present themselves within his essays. Such contradictions play out in three obvious ways: firstly, his criticism of pedantry though he himself was a learned man and member of the bourgeoisie; secondly, in striving for a sense of universality Montaigne's self and personal life figure significantly (and simultaneously) in his essays; and thirdly, the apparent chaos of a mind at work still requires order such that it might be, in the very least, comprehensible. And yet for Holdheim (1984), and other proponents of Montaigne's work (Heilker 1996, Lopate 1995:1999), he manages these contradictions, and indeed utilises them as an authorising force – as a means by which he positions himself as an authority on both the subject and the textual form, able to unite apparently contradictory poles.

The notion of the apparent order and chaos at play within Montaigne's essays prompts Heilker (1996) to offer a cautionary warning to those who might see the perceived rhetorical freedom of the essay as limitless. He takes issue with the implication that chrono-logic ordering is a more natural process of thinking and association when compared with traditional rhetorical structuring. Heilker asserts that while the essay requires a natural 'associative and intuitive thinking', so too does traditional rhetoric, albeit in differing degrees. The important distinction Heilker (1996) makes is that the greater use of associative and intuitive thinking does not necessarily mean that the essay is closer to 'actual thought' than other written forms. What Heilker (1996) rejects is the notion that one form of thinking, either intuitive or logical, is more 'natural' than the other. He states that it is incorrect to assume that the essay is an

> embodiment of some kind of primordial, uncontaminated, prerhetorical thinking process which spontaneously and continuously generates original forms, a thinking and forming more "natural" than that embodied in traditional rhetorical forms... as if there were only one kind of thought, one kind of cognitive flow "naturally" at work from which we have [previously] deviated. (Heilker 1996, p. 26)

In comparing chrono-logic with the ordering of logic evident in more traditional rhetorical forms, Heilker (1996) also points out that Montaigne, while 'freed' by the

essay genre, was still limited by its structure, in much the same way as other writers are limited by the fundamental elements within other written forms:

> While adhering to the rules of chrono-logic grants him more freedom in development than other traditional rhetorical forms, grants him the license to go out of his way, it does not allow him complete and utter freedom to wildly or haphazardly associate ideas, nor does it allow him to forgo his responsibilities to his reader. (Heilker 1996, p. 27)

Thus, while granted a certain freedom by the essay, Montaigne was still restricted by an assumed responsibility to the subject and the reader. What the essay enabled, Heilker (1996) posits, was the exploration of Montaigne's 'epistemological skepticism' (p. 27). Montaigne believed in 'the tentativeness, uncertainty, instability and inconclusiveness of human understanding' (p. 28), a belief that was unable to be adequately accounted for in traditional rhetorical prose. Because of this, Montaigne required a new discourse strategy, an entirely new genre.

Heilker's argument reminds us that the essay offers only an alternative mode of discourse, not one that should be used to supplant all other written forms. Perhaps because proponents of the essay genre, both practitioners and theorists, historically have had to argue, constantly and consistently, for the legitimacy and understanding of the genre (unlike, for example, fiction, drama or scientific writing), there is a sense in which these same people have held up the essay as a beacon or remedy to all apparent issues (representation, epistemology, reading and authority) existing within other written forms.

The emergence of other practitioners and appropriations

Montaigne's essays were translated into English towards the end of the sixteenth century and became widely popular in Britain in a climate that Good (1988) describes as 'empirical and individualistic... [dominated by] bourgeois values' (p. viii). It was subsequently not long before the English essay as a form came into being, penned firstly by Francis Bacon:

> It may reasonably be said that we owe both [the term 'essay' and its introduction to England] to Bacon, and that 1597, when he published the little book containing ten pieces of the most concentrated literary pemmican ever presented, is the birth-year of the English essay. (Walker 1915, p. 5)

While Bacon spearheaded the development of the essay in England, his essayistic styling differed from that of Montaigne. This difference signalled what Lopate (1999) describes as an 'inevitable specialization' (p. 338), a split between the informal style of Montaigne and a more formal, serious style – something akin to learned commentary (Holman 1972, p. 205). Though Bacon wrote and published some informal, 'familiar' essays, he is, argues Lopate (1999), ultimately the originator of the formal essay. In his introduction to *Francis Bacon: Essays*, Smeaton (1906), writes that Montaigne's and Bacon's essays warrant comparison because of the relatively short period (seventeen years) between their 'first editions'. Smeaton argues that while Montaigne's essays are broad in topic and popular in appeal, Bacon's show a greater 'intellectual grip' and 'preternatural acumen' (p. xix). Smeaton (1906) argues that Bacon

> lacked Montaigne's lightness of touch and piquant picturesqueness in stating obvious truths so as to make them look like new; while Montaigne in turn was entirely destitute of the great English essayist's marvellous penetration into the very soul of things, and of his superb ratiocinative faculty. If Montaigne was the greater literary artist, Bacon was the profounder moral and intellectual force. (p. xix)

Although Montaigne's essays are not generally considered in the context of the formal/informal split, having preceded this movement, Smeaton's (1906) comparison does shed some light on the attributes of the Baconian, and formal essay, in general. Bacon's essays for the most part exhibit a dogmatic and systematic approach to the subject, adopting an impersonal style that is revealed in the use of conventional rhetorical structuring and parochial prose.

Dobrée (1946) agrees, asserting that Bacon's essays were very different to those of Montaigne:

> ... so the self hardly comes in; he is concerned with the world outside the individual; he is positive, not sceptical or musing. You might indeed call these essays collections of philosophical "wisecracks," based on learning and experience of the world. (p. 8)

Dobrée (1946) tracks the historical course of the essay and, as with Smeaton, his comparison of Montaigne and Bacon serves to highlight the differing stylistic practices of two writers working within the same generic mode.

At the time that Bacon was writing his formal essays, 'two other popular [writing] forms made their appearance, forms which were later to become fused with the [English] essay, to relieve its purely thoughtful content' (Dobrée 1946, p. 12). The first of these forms was the 'descriptive piece' – aimed at capturing the 'feel of life at any particular time' and which 'sometimes combined... conversations and stories' (Dobrée 1906, p. 13). The second of these forms was that of 'character writing' – the depiction of individuals who were mostly people the writer had 'met casually and could imagine more about' (Dobrée 1906, p. 14).[1] These character sketches most often aimed to present regular, typical kinds of people: 'a drunkard, a reserved man, a shark, a plain country fellow' (Dobrée 1946, p. 14). It was this rendering of the common person that for Dobrée signals a defining feature of the seventeenth century English essay.

Towards the latter half of the seventeenth century, the essay became less a 'philosophic epigram' and more a 'musing contemplation' (Dobrée 1946, p.14). Dobrée argues that in the hands of Abraham Cowley the essay loses its 'statement of [implied] finality', replacing this with the 'discussion of a general idea' (p. 14). In this way Cowley's essays are much more closely associated with Montaigne than with Bacon. But it is this shift towards a more friendly, personal style which, as suggested by Dobrée (1946), led to the next major development in the essay genre – that seen in the essays of Addison and Steele.

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[1] In more contemporary times the 'descriptive piece' and 'character writing' have come to be known more widely as literary reportage or ethnographic writing.

The periodical essays of Addison and Steele, published first in *The Tatler*, and then *The Spectator*, have their origins in the personal essay, suggests Holman (1979); but Root (1999) argues that the publications themselves 'anchor' the essay form in journalistic practice. As popular magazine serials, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* opened the essay form to a wide reading audience, and served this readership by publishing essays that, Dobrée (1946) argues, were 'a kind of barometer of popular educated opinion and feeling' (p. 17). Dobrée examines this issue further, linking community and text as simultaneously influencing and influenced:

> In the seventeenth century man was discovering himself, seeing himself, so to speak, in relation to the universe; the essays therefore tended to be philosophical. In the eighteenth, man thought he had settled the main philosophic questions, and left the great problems behind, so he began to work himself out as social creature. The eighteenth century was creating the social man, that is, the man (and indeed, with increasing stress, the woman) who formed 'polite society', and was to be full of the social virtues. Its essays, therefore, are nearly all moralistic. (Dobrée 1946, p. 17)

Watson (1956), like Dobrée, claims that Steele's aim in publishing *The Tatler* was didactic, in that the paper can be seen as instructing the middle class on what to think and how to behave. The purpose of *The Spectator*, which succeeded *The Tatler*, Watson (1956) suggests, was 'broader and more elaborate' (p. 1). Though *The Spectator* also served as something of a middle-class manual on behaviour and etiquette, its contents were more varied, and contained a 'firmer grasp on the manner and the matter' (Watson 1956, p.2).

Bryan and Crane (1916) similarly highlight the ways in which the social and cultural mood of the early eighteenth century played a direct role in shaping the kinds of essays appearing in the periodicals of the time. They too regard the eighteenth century essay as a reaction to the behaviour, morals and improprieties of a middle class rising in both numbers and affluence. Further to this, Bryan and Crane saw the essays of this time become institutionalised in, of all places, the coffee-houses of London:

> By the beginning of the eighteenth century the coffee-house had come to be one of the most influential of London institutions, the centre of innumerable discussions on morals, literature, politics, society ... [writers] reported its conversation, described and sometimes satirized its characters, attempted to reform its evil tendencies, and in general reflected its spirit and tone ... more than any other literary form of the eighteenth century, the periodical essay was an outgrowth of the London coffee-houses. (Bryan & Crane 1916, p. xxx)

For Dobrée, the effects of the London coffee-houses and the periodical essays of Addison and Steele were to be long-lasting. Writing in 1946, he argued 'that we are still under the influence of the eighteenth century' (p. 17). Indeed, on this point Dobrée is not alone: some 40 years earlier, Fowler (1907) asserted that the essays of Addison and Steele used a language and style 'of our own day'. Before the periodical essay, he concludes, English essays and prose more generally had

> been elaborate and ornate, often abounding in long sentences like the 'periods' of Latin prose, often stiff and stately and leaving you with the sense of something artificially composed... Addison and Steel wrote... [in] a style that caught the ease and spontaneous flow of conversation whilst it never generated into slipshod speech or vulgarity. (Fowler 1907, p. xii)

It is interesting to note that while a conversational style quickly became a primary feature of Montaigne's essays, it took over a century for this approach to be adopted by English practitioners. While there are similarities in conversational style between Montaigne and the informal English essayists, Heikler (1966) argues that there is a fundamental difference between the two kinds of essays, namely the presence in the former, and absence in the latter, of 'epistemological skepticism' (p. 34).

Montaigne's renowned question "'*Que sais-je?*'— 'What do I know?'" exemplifies his task: to challenge traditional rhetorical structures, and ultimately question the ways in which knowledge is produced. This stands in marked contrast to the work of the informal essayists. On this point, Gross asserts, Montaigne asks 'What *do* I know?' not 'What am I supposed to know?' (Gross 1991, p. xviiii).

Montaigne's essays incorporate a valuable process of self-interrogation and reflection, which serves both the essayist and the reader – Montaigne's journey of discovery and understanding invites 'readers' to embark on both his, and their own, travels through '*Que sais-je?*'. Addison and Steele's periodical essays, however, were ultimately concerned with what readers *ought* to know – readers are not so much sharing an intimate journey of discovery, but rather (continuing the travel metaphor), they are on a fully-booked group tour with Addison or Steele as their guides.

Bryan and Crane (1916) view the essays of Addison and Steele as 'oriented definitely toward the analysis and criticism of contemporary social life' (p. xxiv). This analysis, for scholars like Heilker (1996), lacks Montaigne's epistomological scepticism – his disillusionment with established didactic techniques. But while Addison and Steele might be seen to have abandoned key elements of the Montaignean project, their writing in many ways still combined aspects of his style, most notably, parochial prose and a conversational manner.

Bryan and Crane (1916) see in Addison and Steele's writing the influence of Bacon and Cowley. They argue that the varied influences on Addison and Steele's essays, and the inclusion of other new literary approaches, such as the character sketch, revealed the periodical essay to be a 'whole new species' (Bryan & Crane, p. xxxiii). Indeed, for them, when *The Spectator* ceased publication at the end of 1712, 'the eighteenth century essay in all its varieties was fully formed' (p. xxvii). Not a bad effort – a century worth of accolades for just over a decade of work.

By the early nineteenth century, a group of essayists, notably Lamb, Hunt, Hazlitt, and De Quincey, had established a place for a new kind of essay text – the familiar essay. Their essays moved away from the moralistic, didactic style of Steele, Addison, and Johnson, and were much broader in topic:

> Each essayist wrote upon whatever presented itself to him as an attractive or congenial theme; his range of subject was determined only by the breadth or narrowness of his individual interests and sympathies (Bryan & Crane 1916, pp. xli-xlii).

The style of these essayists, suggests Bryan and Crane (1916), much more closely resembled that of Montaigne. Unlike Steele, Addison and Johnson, who often hid themselves behind created personas (that of the Tatler and Mr Spectator developed by Steele and Addison, and in Johnson's case, the Chinese traveller), the identities of the essayists Lamb, Hunt, Hazlitt and De Quincey were revealed more openly and directly.

Another important point of difference between the eighteenth and nineteenth century essay is length. Whereas essays in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* were restricted to a single sheet printed on both sides, the nineteenth century essay increased its scope as a result of the establishment of the 'modern literary magazine' (p. xliii). These magazines, such as *Blackwood's Magazine* and *London Magazine*, concentrated on the publication of essays of 'genuine literary merit or interest' (p. xlv). Their aim was to present an essay distinct from that seen in the earlier journals and newspapers, and this, argue Bryan and Crane (1916), 'made possible the changed content and manner of the essay, which could result only from an enlargement of its physical limits' (p. xlvi).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the familiar essay took hold, resulting in 'more essays being written for their own sake, rather than for the sake of the subject; there is a shift from matter to manner, from discussion to conversation' (Gross 1991, p. xxi). Interestingly, Gross attributes the essay's decline in popularity at this time to this shift in the form and styling.

Gross (1991) argues that it is difficult to make many generalisations in relation to the essay in the twentieth century. He does acknowledge, however, that these essays share with those of Montaigne an informality and an independence – they seem to exude the Orwellian motto 'I write as I please' (Gross, 1991). Moving forward again, Gross (1991) suggests that essayists in the later half of the twentieth century,

> Continue to write as they please, although it is true that they are less likely to talk about essays than "pieces". "Essay" has come to sound a little too leisurely: "piece" strikes the required note of journalistic toughness. And the demands of

> journalism have in fact pushed writers who might have once set up as essayists further and further in the direction of reportage, travel writing, profiles, instant comment. There is less time and scope for the essay proper. But essays still get written... Certainly there is nothing to suggest that the essay is dying; but then perhaps a form that has already led so many lives is virtually unkillable. (p. xxii) [2]

The contemporary essay and creative nonfiction

Most contemporary writers and theorists engaged with the essay genre indicate that the form has experienced a recent renaissance. It is, says Epstein (1985), 'a sweet time to be an essayist' (p. 411). It would certainly seem to be true that nonfiction, and in particular creative/literary nonfiction, is experiencing popularity among readers both in Australia and internationally. It has been argued that nonfiction is increasingly being read in preference to fiction.[3]

Despite this apparent rise in popularity, Good, writing two decades ago, comments that the essay still

> conjures up the image of a middle-aged man in a worn tweed jacket in an armchair smoking a pipe by a fire in his private library in a country house somewhere in southern England, in about 1910, maundering on about the delights of idleness, country walks, tobacco, old wine, old books, blissfully unaware that he and his entire culture are about to be swept away by the Great War and Modern Art. (1988, p.vii)

This image of the essay, Good (1988) explains, exists in parallel with that which depicts the essay as that 'thing' set by teachers in which students, in a dry, dogmatic, and objective way, go about demonstrating their newly acquired scholastic knowledge. Therefore, Good asserts, 'essays are seen somehow as adjuncts to "major" genres or ideas, not as works in themselves' (p. vii).

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[2] Recent talk of a revival has spanned the past two decades, with the earliest of these conversations coming out of the US. However, in the Australian context, a rise in visibility of, and dialogue on, the essay can be seen from the mid-1990s onwards. Notably, 1998 saw the inaugural publication of *The Best Australian Essays*.

[3] See for example Gerard 1996, Salusinszky 1997, Sullivan 1998, Root & Steinberg 2001, Craven 2001, Modjeska 2002, Bishop 2003, Mordue 2003.

In many ways, it would seem that the conversation about the rise or decline of the essay genre, in terms of public opinion and popularity, has been circulating amongst proponents of the form for some twenty years. Whether this is a thinly veiled attempt at self-legitimisation, as Davis (1999) and Carter (2001) suggest in their discussions of the status of the Australian essay in the twenty-first century, or a continuation of the history of a genre which has been plagued by problems of classification, understanding, inclusivity/exclusivity, and certainly validity, is unclear. It is perhaps a combination of all of these. However, what has resulted from such conversations is a newer, apparently more inclusive and more marketable genre – creative nonfiction.

The examinations of the creative nonfiction genre mirror to a large extent the work of those contemplating the essay: 'What is it?' 'How might it be defined?' Creative nonfiction pulls together those texts which are not fiction, drama or poetry, but which offer up something more than those that are manifestly scientific or academic. Creative nonfiction enables the consideration of these 'creative' texts under a broader rubric, because inevitably the 'sub-genres' that comprise creative nonfiction offer up multiple sites of comparison with regard to similarities and problematics.

Creative nonfiction, Root and Steinberg (2001) suggest, 'centres on the essay but continually strains against the boundaries of other genres, endeavoring to push them back and to expand its own space without altering its own identity' (p. xxiv). This is perhaps not an endeavour new to the essay as such, but we might see that creative nonfiction offers a slightly different framework within which some notions of the contemporary essay might fall. Although this project is centred on the essay form in Australia, it cannot – particularly as the creative nonfiction dialogue begins to enter the Australian context[4] – fail to acknowledge the growing body of work/writing on the subject of creative nonfiction coming out of the United States and Canada.

[4] See for example Brien (2000), 'The place where the real and the imagined coincides: an introduction to Australian creative nonfiction', *TEXT special issue Website*, http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue1/intro.htm, viewed September 2002.

Creative nonfiction, like the essay on which it is centred, is a somewhat elusive form, prompting Pearson (2001) to note that although writers and academics continue to work towards a definition, 'there is not yet even consensus on what to call it (creative nonfiction, literary nonfiction, new journalism, personal journalism...)' (p. 317-318). Indeed, in Australia we seem more likely to talk of 'literary nonfiction', whereas in the United States and Canada the term 'creative nonfiction' is used most often. It is difficult to find recent writings in which 'new journalism' and 'personal journalism' are used as terms which encapsulate the whole miscellaneous collection of this genre – possibly because the inclusion of 'journalism' may be seen to exclude writing such as memoir, which certainly falls under the umbrella of creative/literary nonfiction, but has not traditionally been associated with journalistic reportage.

Root and Steinberg (2001) suggest that the spectrum of creative nonfiction includes 'personal essays and memoirs, literary journalism, and academic/cultural criticism' (p. xv). We can also add to this list examples such as travel and nature essays, literary history, and obituaries. Importantly, the notion of creative nonfiction signals that the sub-genres of which it is comprised are not in themselves always distinct forms:

> One of the hallmarks of this form is that the boundaries between the subgenres are quite expansive. That's because its writers often braid narrative telling with fictional and poetic techniques and combine portraiture and self-reflection with reportage and critical analysis... [this then] highlights the elasticity and versatility of this still-evolving genre. (Root & Steinberg 2001, p. xv)

Root and Steinberg (2001) argue that, despite the malleable and elusive nature of creative nonfiction, there are elements – although not consistent in presence and proportion – common to all creative nonfiction writing. These are: 'personal presence, self-discovery and self-exploration, veracity, flexibility of form, and literary approaches to nonfiction' (Root and Steinberg 2001, p. xxiv). In many ways, this analysis resembles that which we have already seen in relation to the essay, particularly in consideration of Montaigne's oeuvre. Interestingly, however, unlike some positions on the essay (Lukács 1974 [1910], Adorno 1984 [1958], Kauffmann 1981, Holdheim 1984, Joeres and Mittman 1993, Heilker 1996) creative nonfiction does not, on the

whole, position itself as overtly political.[5] There is certainly a sense in which creative nonfiction is presented as a literary alternative to 'other' nonfiction – as a kind of more pleasurable, aestheticised, open text. Yet we do not see within the creative nonfiction dialogue (at least to the same extent as theories of the essay), the notion that creative nonfiction, as a cognitive form, challenges traditional understandings of knowledge and logic. The politics of the essay are covered in the following chapters, but it is worth noting that Root and Steinberg's (2001) creative nonfiction manual seems to ask politely, rather than argue strongly, for the legitimisation of creative nonfiction as a genre in its own right. One might indeed consider this in keeping with the principles of the genre; that is, as a shared conversation in which persuasion occurs via a personal transaction between writer and reader.

In *The Fourth Genre*, Root and Steinberg (2001) examine those elements considered essential in defining the creative nonfiction text: personal presence; self discovery and self exploration; veracity; flexibility of form; and literary approaches to nonfiction. The following sub-sections provide an overview of these elements, and draw on other theorists/writers to expand aspects of the conversation, particularly in relation to literature, truth and nomenclature.

Personal presence

Harris (1996) believes that an important quality of essays is 'that they strongly suggest an authorial personality or character, or, more accurately, an undeniable persona' (p. 936). The idea of a narrating persona in creative nonfiction is something with which Gornick (2001) concurs. She suggests that within each piece of creative nonfiction the author develops a 'persona' to 'serve the insight' (p. 23) – the *thing* which the essayist or creative nonfiction writer seeks to examine. In good creative nonfiction, Gornick (2001) asserts, the writers are

> engaged at the deepest level with the essay. The form itself has released them into purposeful innerliness. Here the writing does not wander about the page accumulating description for its own sake, or developing images independent of

[5] With perhaps the exception of Faery's essay "On the Possibilities of the Essay: A Mediation", in Root & Steinberg 2001, *The Fourth Genre*, Longman, New York.

> thought, or musing lyrically. The point of view originates in the nervous system and concentrates itself in the person of a narrator who causes the essay to move steadily forward... the obligation is to use the narrating self only to shape those associations that will provide drive and lead to inner resolution... They know they are there to clarify in relation to the subject in hand – and on this obligation they deliver. (pp. 29-30)

The examination of the self is then both an intimate and thoughtful endeavour. According to Harris (1996), 'the writing of a personal essay requires much more than the [simple] employment of the first person singular pronoun' (p. 939).

Successful personal presence is achieved, argues Gornick (2001), when the reader believes that the narrator is trustworthy; 'that we know who is speaking is the trustworthy narrator achieved' (p. 17). Gornick (2001) illustrates her point with the opening sentence of J R Ackerley's *My Father and Myself*: 'I was born in 1896 and my parents were married in 1919' (p. 1). This one line suggests a voice which will address, Gornick (2001) states, 'with grace and candor whatever it is necessary to examine... we believe that the narrator is telling us all he knows' (p. 19). White (1977) articulates a similar viewpoint when he writes that the essayist 'cannot indulge himself in deceit or concealment, for he will be found out in no time' (p viii).

Bloom (2003) argues that the relationship between reader and writer is a 'subtle partisanship, elicited by the narrative elements of the work' (p. 285). These 'narrative elements', comprising the point of view, tone and voice of the author/narrator, constitute the personal presence within the text. Point of view, Bloom suggests, can be seen as 'perspective, suffused with... values' (p. 285) discernable through language and stylistic choices, from which the author tells the story of lived experience.

While tone and voice are inextricably linked to the author's point of view, they also signal the kind of relationship that exists between the author, the text/subject, and ultimately the reader. Bloom (2003) writes:

> In creative nonfiction tone and voice are clear, conspicuous, unmistakable— and therefore an ethical expression of the author's attitude toward the subject. Stories

> that are written from the heart must be understood from the heart, and tone is a powerful index of that understanding. (p. 286)

Self discovery and self exploration

'Personal essayists', Lopate (1995) tells us, 'are adept at interrogating their ignorance' (p. xxvii). In this way the creative nonfiction writer examines both what he knows and what he does not. Sanders (2001) agrees; 'the essay is the closest thing we have, on paper, to a record of the individual mind at work and play' (p. 330). The creative nonfiction writer takes an experience, a memory, or an event, and examines it closely, from all angles. Root and Steinberg (2001) suggest that within the creative nonfiction essay, often 'the subject matter becomes the catalyst or trigger for some personal journey or inquiry or self-interrogation' (p. xxv).

In discussing the personal essay, Malinowitz (2003) writes that the essayist does not seek to claim authority: 'she is not teaching a lesson so much as candidly revealing the process by which she has learned one' (p. 319). The self discovery/exploration in the creative nonfiction or personal essay is often revealed in depicting how the '"opposition" got the best of her' (p. 319). Often, Malinowitz (2003) writes,

> The opposition is some external or buried truth that finally penetrates her cluelessness, or her defensiveness, or her foolhardy prejudices; or perhaps it's a force in the big, bad world that overpowers her, so that though she proclaims and explains the rightness of her position, she simultaneously – and often comically – depicts herself in the act of being vanquished, a battered, outvoted minority of one. (p. 319)

It is an argument with which Hardison (1989) agrees, stating that:

> An essay is not an oration... or a prose poem. It is "essaying to be"... "thought thinking about itself"... It is the enactment of the process of accommodation between the world and the "I", and thus it is consciousness realizing itself. (p. 26)

However, warns E B White (1977) – the acknowledged doyen of the personal essay in the US – one cannot take up a pen and set about writing 'merely because he entertains random thoughts or is in a happy or wandering mood' (p. viii). The essayist 'is able to

make the small loom large', argues Lopate (1995, p. xxviii); the essay, whilst rooted in the personal, must always have wider, more public implications. These do not have to be grand, but it is this notion of moving beyond the personal with which Sanders (1989) is concerned when he suggests that 'looking outward on the world helps distinguish the essay from pure autobiography, which dwells more complacently on the self' (p. 37). He continues:

> I assume that the public doesn't give a hoot about my private life (an assumption also borne out by sales figures)... If I write of hiking up a mountain, with my one year old boy riding like a papoose on my back, and of what he babbled to me... I do so not because I am deluded into believing that my baby, like the offspring of Prince Charles, matters to the great world. I do so because I know the great world produces babies of its own and watches them change cloud-fast before its doting eyes... I choose to write about my experience not because it is mine but because it seems to me a door through which others might pass. (Sanders 1989, p. 38)

Looking beyond oneself to the wider world ensures a greater connection between writer and reader. Tompkins (2001), herself an essayist, 'loves' it when writers write about their personal experiences because: 'I can match my own experience up with theirs, feel cousin to them, and say, yes, that's how it is' (p. 351). This process elucidates recognition and shared understanding through similarities in experience – not the activity of the experience necessarily (such as hiking up a mountain) – but the experience of certain feelings and emotions in particular situations. This idea harks back to Montaigne's observation that every person carries within 'the entire form of the human condition' (1993 [1877], III: 2); and the *essaying* of this condition is what makes creative nonfiction, as Sanders and Tompkins imply, a vehicle through which readers can observe and come to understand what it means to be human.

Veracity

Creative nonfiction, while claiming to represent truth – in the sense that it is not fiction – does so on what is arguably a conditional basis. That is, the reader and writer must both understand that the writing of personal experience (as is indicative of the creative nonfiction genre) is also the writing of memory. In telling the stories of one's

life, Bloom (2003) writes, so too the stories of others people's lives are told. Inevitably, however, the telling of one person's 'version of events' is likely to be different from another person's telling. In this way, creative nonfiction accommodates what Blew (2001) describes as the 'arranging [of] scraps' of memory to reveal 'the emotional truth [of a story] as I perceived it' (p. 234). The complexities surrounding notions of *truth* reveal varying ideologies and practices among creative nonfiction writers. For example, Gutkind (1997) writes,

> Reporters are told that "truth" means, among other things, that their work must be accurate and informational. Nothing about the people, places, and situations about which they are writing can be altered or made up. This paean to information and accuracy should reverberate in the mind of the creative nonfiction writer as well... Names, dates, places, descriptions, quotations may not be created or altered for any reason, at any time. (p. 10)

Bloom (1994), on the other hand, is far more moderate in her approach to the notion of truth in writing nonfiction. She believes, as does Blew, that the 'essential meaning' lays in a 'felt truth' – the emotional experience of a moment or situation. Bloom asserts that what is important is not 'the name of the person you went with on your first "real" date [with]; but how you felt about the experience before, during, and afterward' (1994, p. 87). Bloom does suggest, however, that when writing about others, a different set of parameters applies – the incongruities cannot be filled with 'invented facts'. On this point Blew (2001) states

> I struggled for a long time with the conflicting claims of the exact truth of a story and the emotional truth as I perceived it. I restrict myself to what I "know" happened: the concrete details, the objects, the history. When I speculate, I say so. (p. 234)

Bartkevicius (2001) suggests that what Blew calls 'speculation' is necessary when writing creative nonfiction. She states:

> Fact, as Virginia Woolf points out, is not necessarily the same as truth... what it means to be at a birthday party, what it means to participate in a conversation, how much more it is than the sounds we make, the words we speak... [Nonfiction] has the range to sweep inward, follow the path of the mind, add

> layers of contemporaneous imagination, memory and dream to the observable events of the present moment. (Blew 2001, pp. 230-231)

Bartkevicius (2001) observes that memory and experience are not external things, and as such the 'concrete details' form only part of the truth of any one memory or experience. Ives (2001) takes this argument a step further, suggesting that the 'concrete' details may be inaccurate, but not necessarily untrue. He writes:

> I don't remember what my father wore under his orange raincoat during my JV football games. But if I wrote about it, I'd tell the reader he had on an open collared, red plaid shirt, with black suspenders fastened to dark green cotton trousers— the kind school janitors used to wear. Oh yes! He'd also have on an old frayed T-shirt, his thick dark, chest hair curling out over the neckband. I'd write all this because it was a standard outfit for my father, because his wearing it beneath his raincoat was both probable and possible. In my mind, when he opens his raincoat, he's not naked. I'm not being "flashed" while my imagination rummages around in a wardrobe. (Ives 2001, p. 272)

Undeniably there are complicated ethical issues involved in the writing of nonfiction, particularly creative nonfiction. Bloom (2003) is right to suggest that 'where living people are concerned there can be virtue in protecting the innocent, the vulnerable, the voiceless, private people who would be destroyed if their inmost secrets were betrayed' (p. 279). There is also validity in the argument that fact and truth are not necessarily the same – as with Ives' description of his father's clothing. While this may not have been what he wore on the day in question, this outfit is indicative of his father's wardrobe and therefore goes some way to framing the character that is his father. This inclusion of detail is what Kupfer (2001) describes as the acceptable 'shaping' of truth. Certainly there would seem to be a line: where that line resides and how and when it should, if ever, be crossed is, Bloom (2003) argues, something creative nonfiction writers will need to 'contend with routinely... and resolve differentially, on a case-by-case basis.' (p. 279)

Flexibility of form

As with the personal essay, the structure of creative nonfiction allows for writerly experimentation in thought, form, and style. A piece of creative nonfiction may incorporate, for example, elements of the personal essay and nature writing;[6] or a memoir, attributes of literary cultural criticism.[7] Within these, the writer might use literary techniques such as dialogue and characterisation, lyrical and rhythmical language, or direct quotation from another author's work. Again, here, the options are many.

In terms of structure, creative nonfiction is not restricted by a notion of linearity, as are other more traditional nonfiction forms. Nor is it limited by fixed boundaries, such as those ascribed to the academic article, for example. The essay, Faery (2001) argues, 'rests on perspective, on the position of the essayist within a web of culture' (p. 248).[8] In this way, there is room, within the creative nonfiction essay, to explore thought, however tangential it may seem; creative nonfiction, after all, does not seek the kind of 'logical' ordering of fact, the development of a strong, indisputable argument, or an objectivity which suggests the portrayal of a whole, finite truth. 'The essay, then', suggests Faery (2001):

> is and has been a form open to the articulation of estrangements and contradictions, a place for expressing the strains, differences, rejections as well as connections experienced by those who feel or have felt particularly marginalized by the discourses which have composed the social text. (p. 249)

In this sense we can understand the essay to be open to change, tentative, knowingly subjective, and thoroughly self-conscious. The essay, Hardwick explains, is 'freed from the need for defence except that provided by an individual intelligence and sparkle' (cited in Lopate 2001, p. 301-302).

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[6] See, for example, Annie Dillard 2001, 'Living like weasels', in Root and Steinberg (2001), p. 54.

[7] See, for example, Mary Clearman Blew 2001, 'The unwanted child', in Root and Steinberg (2001), p. 19.

[8] It is important to acknowledge that Faery uses the terms 'essay' and 'creative nonfiction essay' interchangeably. This highlights the point that CNF is inherently linked to the essay and while the discourse of creative nonfiction moves into some new territory, particularly in relation to the sub-genres, there is a historicity of the essay that creative nonfiction picks up on.

Creative nonfiction's openness to change, tentative knowing and transparent subjectivity does not, despite a tradition in academic thought to the contrary, imply that this genre is devoid of intellectual rigour. Certainly Faery (2001) sees the genre as an 'attack' on what she terms 'monumental discourse' because 'as a form it negotiates the split between public discourse... and private utterance' (pp. 248-249). Lopate (1995), in addition, asserts that the essay's apparent 'formlessness' is actually 'more a strategy to disarm the reader with the appearance of unstudied spontaneity than a reality of composition' (p. xxxviii). Lopate (1995) argues that in a good essay the treatment of the subject may appear 'to be widening, even losing its way, [but] it is actually eliminating false hypotheses, narrowing its emotional target and zeroing in on it' (p. xxxviii).

In this way, Douglas Hesse's introduction to the January 2003 edition of *College English,* which highlights the apparent difficulty in cataloguing creative nonfiction, bears some relevance. This difficulty is arguably attributable to a flexibility of form in the creative nonfiction genre. Hesse points out that the confusion over where to locate creative nonfiction in relation to other texts is a clash between 'form and content' (p. 2). Creative nonfiction encompasses many sub-genres, it tackles many varied subjects and issues, and does so in many varied ways. Thus, Hesse (2003) writes:

> Cataloging creative nonfiction is a haphazard venture, as anyone knows from prospecting Borders or Barnes and Noble for outcroppings of its various genres... *Standing up to the Rock*, Louise Freeman-Toole's essays and memoirs... receive an F [American History], as did Kathleen Stocking's *Letters from the Leelanau*, about northern Michigan life, and Eddy L. Harris' *South of Haunted Dreams: A Memoir.* Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is located under Q ("Science"), while her *Teaching a Stone to Talk* earns an A ("General Works") for "1. Nature, 2. Life" in some catalogs and Q in others. Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* falls under G ("Geography, Anthropology, Recreation"). Patricia Hampl's *Spillville* (about an Iowa town) receives an M ("Music") in... Ohio ... but... [a] P as one moves to Illinois. (pp. 2-3)

Hesse (2003) is not out to cast 'blame', but he does claim that it is difficult to imagine 'novels being fairly randomly catalogued by subject matter or by genre, so that *Crime and Punishment* might as well come under K (Law) or P (Language and Literature)' (p. 3). It is a predicament to which Lopate (1999) relates; he states that 'when my first essay collection, *Bachelorhood*, came out, booksellers had trouble figuring out where to stock it. Autobiography? Self-help? Short stories? I felt like saying, "Hey, this category has been around for a long time; what's the big deal?"' (p. 301). Lopate is forced to concede, however, that the essay form is not, despite claims of a renaissance, as popular as it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this regard, it is also worth bearing in mind Root and Steinberg's (2001) assertion that creative nonfiction is a 'still-evolving genre' (p. xv). Not that creative nonfiction is a new form of writing practice *per se*, but it is rather, a new *term* around which new ideas and theories might be formulated. It is perhaps then more useful to consider that the conversations about creative nonfiction are in themselves still evolving, and so too are the ideas as to how creative nonfiction might be marketed to the public and the academy, in the US and around the world.

Literary approaches to nonfiction

Anderson (1989) argues that the word *literary*, as we speak of it here in terms of *literary* nonfiction and *literary* approaches to nonfiction, 'masks all kinds of ideological concerns, all kinds of values, and is finally more a way of looking at a text... than an inherent property of a text' (p. ix). He points to the idea that literary nonfiction is not meant to invoke the literature of a 'sacred canon', but rather 'a way of looking at the world, a way of knowing, a form of inquiry— concrete, dramatic, grounded in a self' (p. xix).

Determining what is literary and what is not is a difficult task, Anderson suggests, since the boundaries of literary studies are 'porous or fluid' (1989, p. xix) and thus the boundaries of what one might consider literature are perpetually moving. In this vein, Anderson (1989) notes that nonfiction 'is no longer [considered] the bastard child, the second class citizen' (1989, p. xix). Root and Steinberg (2001) concur, stating that

creative nonfiction is now ready to take its place in literature, as the 'fourth genre' next to the *literary* greats, 'poetry, drama, and fiction' (p. xxiii). Literature, Anderson (1989) argues, has ceased to be regarded as mysterious and abstract, suggesting that thanks to poststructuralist theory and practice, we are now concerned with how meaning is made and interpreted in language.

In regards to the question, 'What is literature?' Eagleton (1983)[9] agrees with Anderson that the term is loaded and problematic. He argues that the Formalist view that literature or literary writing distinguishes itself from common language use, namely, that literary language is more poetic, more meaningful and more artistic than non-literary language, is inherently flawed. As Eagleton (1983) suggests, what is common, poetic, meaningful and/or artistic can vary 'according to class, region, gender, status and so on, [and can therefore] by no means be neatly unified under a single homogenous linguistic community.' (p. 5) His argument highlights the fact that *literariness* is not an objective *thing*, nor, as Anderson similarly states, is it inherent. Eagleton does suggest that what is considered to be literature or literary is subject, at least in part, to value judgements made by individuals, and that these value judgements are themselves subject to a range of factors, which may include ideology, history, race, gender and class. Indeed, Eagleton (1983) states in his introduction to *Literary Theory: an introduction,* 'when I use the words "literary" and "literature" from here on in this book, then, I place them under an invisible crossing-out mark, to indicate that these terms will not really do but that we have no better ones at the moment.' (p. 11). Eagleton's point is significant, but before we abandon *literary* nonfiction in favour of its creative counterpart, it is worthwhile noting that the term *creative* bears many of the same, and certainly a number of its own, problems.

Root and Steinberg (2001) suggest that at the heart of creative nonfiction is the idea that 'language serves the subject' (p. xxvii), and this is arguably what they consider to be the 'literary approach' to nonfiction. Creative nonfiction writers employ imaginative, dramatic prose, their use of metaphor 'probes' (Lounsberry 1990), and

[9] See also Pope, Rob 1998, *The English Studies Book*, Routledge, New York.

the structure and rhythm, or the simple clarity of the written word, all point to a writerly concern for the use of language. This arguably *literary* quality of creative nonfiction is a point which Lounsberry (1990) asserts:

> Call it what you will, care for language can be used as a strainer to separate literary nonfiction from the glut of nonfiction written in pedestrian prose. If the subject of a nonfiction work is compelling, its research exhaustive and verifiably elaborated, and its form artful and narrative, it may still fail the standards of literary nonfiction if its language is dull or diffuse. (p. xv)

Pearson (2001) notes, 'the best nonfiction bestows a range of pleasures' (p. 317). Indeed, Virginia Woolf (1966) thought pleasure to be the controlling principal of the essay. The essay as she considered it was a form in which 'There is no room for the impurities of literature... the essay must be pure— pure like water or pure like wine, but pure from dullness, deadness and deposits of extraneous matter.' (p. 43) Elizabeth Hardwick concurs, explaining that

> The mastery of expository prose, the rhythm of sentences, the pacing, the sudden flash of unexpected vocabulary, redeem the polemic... The essay... is a great meadow of style and personal manner... We consent to watch a mind at work, without agreement often, but only for pleasure (in Lopate 2001).

Despite the rather slippery nature of the term *literary*, it is, as Eagleton suggests, one that is difficult to avoid. Certainly Anderson's argument is a highly pertinent one; that is, that describing and even labelling the creative nonfiction genre as *literary* is not to purport some kind of exclusivity or elitism, but rather is a way of determining how language is used and meaning is made through commonalities in a literary or creative nonfiction *style*. And what is important to this style, Woolf and Hardwick argue, is that it instils pleasure upon reading.

The essay and theory

Outlined in this chapter is a historical and cultural context of the essay in various epochs since the first publication of Montaigne's *Essais* in 1580. This contextual framing shows the essay to be a malleable, fluid written form – the practice and

potential of which has been equally diverse since its inception in the late sixteenth century. Yet it was not until 1910, some 300 years after Montaigne, that any philosophical position on the essay was conclusively articulated; when the essay was considered by Georg Lukács through the gaze of *theory*.

The theoretical positions on the essay, argued first by Lukács (1974 [1910]) and subsequently by Adorno(1984 [1958]), Huxley (1959) and others, reveal a project that scholars and practitioners of creative nonfiction have continued and extended into more contemporary times and understandings of *theory*. It is timely, therefore, having summarised the positions of the essay historically, and creative nonfiction both historically and theoretically, to turn to the first theories of the essay as a means of further contextualising the contemporary Australian essay.

Chapter 2

Further definitions: theoretical framing of the nature and form of the essay

The account of the essay, from Montaigne through to contemporary conversations about creative nonfiction, as presented in the previous chapter, reveals two important elements in the understanding of the genre. Firstly, the essay has taken on many personas (personal/familiar, formal/informal, periodical);[10] and secondly (in regards to the personal essay and creative nonfiction, both of which are inherently linked), there is much contemplation of the 'features' of these texts, such as style, approach, and language use, by scholars on the essay and creative nonfiction. There is also some consideration of the ethical and political potential of this kind of personal discourse. Arguably, both the discussions of creative nonfiction, and the work of scholars such as Holdheim (1984), Heilker (1996) and Lopate (1999, 1995) on the personal essay, expand on a theoretical dialogue about the genre first initiated in 1910 by the theorist Georg Lukács, and continued by his colleague Theodore Adorno, in 1958. This chapter begins, then, with Lukács and Adorno, who were the first to consider the essay in philosophical terms. Indeed it is from their theories that we have come to understand the importance of personal experience and scepticism in the essay.[11] Lukács and Adorno both made a declaration for a utopian essay – though each conceived this ideal in slightly different terms: Lukács viewed the essay in largely cognitive terms, Adorno in more political/ethical terms.

[10] These personas are relevant to the discussions in the previous chapter. Later chapters show other examples/sub-genres of the essay.

[11] It is important to reiterate that the philosophical, theoretical and elemental aspects of the essay text being considered here are for the most part specific to the personal essay. Indeed as the discussions in this chapter reveal, the personal essay has been established as something of a utopian ideal. A theoretical consideration of those essays which do not fulfill the promise of the utopian essay is presented in later chapters.

Both Lukács's and Adorno's foundational work on a theory of the essay is situated within the philosophical movements to which each belonged at the time they penned their observations. Lukács's examination, therefore, is grounded in idealism (influenced by Kant and Hegel), which sought to represent ideas and things, such as the text, in their *ideal* form. Kantian ideology underpins Lukács publication *Soul and Form*, in the preface to which he espoused his theory of the essay. It was not until after *Soul and Form*, and the onset of World War I, that Lukács turned to Marxism. Therefore, we do not see in his work on the essay the kind of Marxist position evident in Adorno's theorising.

Adorno was, like Lukács, a committed Marxist, and his work on the essay reveals a strong political and ethical position on the form. However, 'Lukács's Marxism remained essentially Hegelian' (Kauffmann 1981, p. 22), while Adorno took a contrasting, anti-Hegelian position. Indeed this latter point might be seen as the impetus for Adorno's 'The Essay as Form'. That is, as Kauffmann observes, 'The Essay as Form' is essentially a Marxist 'critique of Lukács's' (p. 24) 1910 examination of the essay. This is not an unproblematic position, for as Kauffmann reminds us

> One of the chief difficulties in comparing the two theories [of Lukács and Adorno] stems from the fact that each theory represents a different stage in the development of the author's work. (Kauffmann 1981, p. 23)

Following on from an examination of Lukács's and Adorno's theories of the essay in this chapter, we then turn to Huxley (1959) who, writing at the same time as Adorno, also set out his consideration of the essay form. Huxley's position on the essay is less philosophical than Adorno's, and delineates the form in terms concerned more with genre issues, style and approach. Yet Huxley (1959) was also interested in a utopian essay, and argued for those elements that would produce a 'most richly satisfying' (p. vii) essay experience.

Having considered the work of Lukács, Adorno and Huxley, the examination then moves to 'alternative poetics' (Kauffmann 1981, p. xii) of the essay. This is seen in Bensmaïa's (1987) examination of the Montaignean essay as it relates to Barthes'

(1973) concept of the *writerly text*. The poststructuralist framework attributable to Barthes' work conceives the utopian ideal of the essay (at least philosophically) in different terms to Lukács and Adorno: there is here a greater concern with issues of language and readership in the production of meaning.

The final section of this chapter then looks at feminist perspectives on the essay. The feminist position takes up Adorno's political/ethical stance on the essay and redefines it in line with feminist ideals. Under feminism, the essay becomes a politically radical tool through the power it affords the narrator of the personal text – the personal essay provides a site for the marginalised to speak with authority.

These theories are important to this project because, as in the previous chapter, they signal a framework within which contemporary understandings of the essay are positioned. Similarly, theory reveals the potential aesthetic, cognitive, political and ethical attributes of the essay form; this in turn provides something of a gauge by which these might be measured in specific examples of the essay seen in *The Best Australian Essays* collections. These theories also highlight a utopian ideal, and simultaneously acknowledge (though are not always able to adequately deal with), manifestations of the essay that fall outside any notion of a utopian framework.

Georg Lukács and cognitive form in the essay

Georg Lukács in 1910 argues that the essay is a form,[12] to be considered in largely cognitive terms. Lukács's observed relationship between the essay and cognition (he is, of course, considering the essay in its *ideal* form) corresponds with Heilker's (1996) notions of 'epistomological skepticism' and 'chrono-logic' ordering evident in Montaigne's essays (pp. 37-43). Indeed it is useful to view Lukács's theorising on the essay in just this way. Lukács was suspicious of the institutional distance between the categories of science and arts; of the fixed structure and finality of traditional rhetorical discourse; and of the objective text in which lived experience was ostensibly

[12] As both Kauffmann (1981) and Heilker (1996) suggest of his work.

dismissed as a lesser form of knowledge or understanding. For Lukács, the essay held the potential to redeem apparent misguided notions of cognition within the text.

Lukács's consideration of what Heilker (1996) termed 'epistemological skepticism' in the essay form is evident in his declaration that the essay has the 'force necessary for a conceptual re-ordering of life, and yet [is] distinguished... from the icy, final perfection of philosophy' (1974, p. 1). Lukács's claim for the essay has its basis in distrust of the hegemonic ordering of knowledge, which saw science and arts systematically separated by their apparently distinct functions. For Lukács, science was seen to be concerned with 'information, facts and "relationships"' (p.2) and arts with aesthetics, with 'souls and destinies' (p. 3). This was a premise with which he was clearly uncomfortable because

> In primitive, as yet undifferentiated epochs, science and art (and religion and ethics and politics) are integrated, they form a single whole; but as soon as science has become separate and independent, everything that has led up to it loses value. (Lukács 1974, p. 3)

As Kauffmann (1981) points out, in some ways Lukács's views 'no longer possess the same urgency for the modern reader' (p. 74). While claims for a multi-disciplinary approach to the examination of cultural artefacts are not new (in relation to contemporary theory), and therefore, the urgency about which Kauffmann speaks has indeed diminished, it is arguably a conversation that is still relevant today. This is perhaps best evidenced in the creative nonfiction dialogue, where personal experience and personal narratives, as an alternative to traditional scientific and academic texts, are paramount to the genre. In these conversations we see, however, that Lukács's notions of science and art have been replaced by objectivity and subjectivity.

There is then a common thread running through Lukács's theory of the essay and the scholarly work on creative nonfiction: both view their respective texts as a potential bridge between the institutional polarisation of arts and science, of subjectivity and objectivity. Thus, in answer to the question: 'What *is* an essay?', Lukács (1974) asserts that 'I want to try and define the essay as strictly as possible, precisely by describing it

as an art form' (p. 2), but also that as an art form, the essay depends on facts and relationships – key aspects of science – because

> The greatest essayists are precisely those who can least well do without it: what they create must be science, even when their vision of life has transcended the sphere of science. Sometimes its free flight is constrained by the unassailable facts of dry matter; sometimes it loses all scientific value because it is, after all, a vision, because it precedes facts and therefore handles them arbitrarily. (1974, p. 13)

For Lukács 'there is, then, a science of the arts' (p. 3). And this 'science of the arts' is, suggests Heilker, realised in Lukács's theory because 'the essay's aesthetic form is determined by the writer's cognitive experience' (Heilker 1996, p. 40). We can understand this cognitive experience as the essayist negotiating her way through the process of knowing and understanding lived experience within the essay form, because for Lukács,

> The essayist needs form only as lived experience and he needs only its life, only the living soul-reality it contains. But this reality is to be found in every immediate sensual expression of life, it can be read out of and into every such experience; life itself can be lived and given form through such a scheme of lived experience. (1974, p. 8)

Lukács argues that there are two kinds of essayists, firstly, the 'great essayists': Plato who needed no 'mediating medium', and also, Montaigne and Kierkegaard; and secondly, those who take not life lived as form, but art itself. These critics of art and literature outnumber the 'great essayists', prompting the assertion from Lukács that their subject matter 'is only the typical subject matter of the essay, not the sole one' (1974, p. 8). Lukács has certainly not tried to hide his preference for the work of 'great essayists' when he writes:

> Because literature, art and philosophy pursue forms openly and directly, whereas in life they are no more than the ideal demand of a certain kind of men and experiences, a lesser intensity of critical capacity is needed to experience something formed than to experience something lived. (1974, p. 8)

In expressing his preference for the essayists for whom form is found in lived experience over those for whom form is given through art – the essayist as critic –

Lukács is forced to concede that the latter cannot be entirely dismissed or denied. Thus, the two kinds of essayists must co-exist, because ultimately 'both ways of contemplating the world are merely standpoints taken up in relation to things, and each is applicable everywhere' (1974, p. 9).

What we can see developing from the tensions outlined above is a theme that Kauffmann argues underlies Lukács's theory of the essay form. This theme is a 'utopia of cognition'; arguably all the elements in Lukács's theory of the essay point to the essay as receiving form from the process of attempting to know and understand the world through personal experience, or through the experience of art. Kauffmann (1981) argues:

> Lukács's theory of the essay depends to a great extent on his conception of the subjective experience of the essayist. One may justly consider this experience to have an important cognitive dimension – taking cognition in the broadest sense as having to do with ways of knowing, perceiving and apprehending the world. (p. 47)

However, Kauffmann (1981) cautions that in accepting the essay as a form with inherently cognitive dimensions,

> we might expect him [Lukács] to attempt to show how the reader responds cognitively to the essay, how the reader's reactions are shaped by the particular linguistic or discursive devices and structures (p. 75).

Kauffmann's point is a valid one. While the essay may seem to possess the ability to bring together science and art, to present the world through lived experience (or art) in such a way as to reveal new and particular cognitive acts, contemporary theory has shown that the reader's role is also fundamental to this process. The reader, we now know, is always involved in the cognitive act apparent in any textual transaction. Therefore, as Kauffmann asserts, the textual devices that might help shape this process for the reader are fundamentally important. Consequently, our concern is not simply the essayist's negotiation of experience, knowledge, and understanding giving form to the essay, but also how this form (and its formal structures) in turn points to ways in which the reader may also negotiate these elements to then create her own understanding and *experience* of the text.

Theodore Adorno and the political implications of the essay

Adorno's 'The Essay as Form' (1958) is hinged, as is Lukács's theory, on the idea of the essay as a cognitive form. Adorno's theorising of the essay, while sharing some similarities with Lukács's work, takes on a much greater political emphasis. The notion of 'political' is used here as it relates to hegemonic notions of knowledge, disciplines and, indeed, politics.

Adorno (1984 [1958]) argues that the essay positions itself as an alternative to discursive thought; or rather, the essay form gathers and presents knowledge differently to that 'achieved' by science or 'created' by art. Adorno posits that the essay's 'concepts are neither deduced from any first principle nor do they come full circle and arrive at a final principle' (p. 152). In this way, notions of method and objectivity do not plague the essay, unlike scientific thought; nor is the essay bound by issues of 'aesthetic semblance' in the same way as one might consider art to be. Furthermore, the essay does not aim for a sense of the 'everlasting', but rather is always open to change – it resists the doctrine.

The essayist, argues Adorno, accepts nothing without question, and as a form the essay ultimately refuses categorisation. We can see that Adorno, therefore, positions the essay form as a direct challenge to dominant discursive structures, notably that of science. What is at stake for Adorno is the falseness he believes is revealed in discourses that claim objectivity and finite notions of knowledge and understanding as their authorising force. Adorno (1984) argues that science will ultimately fail to realise that which it set out to achieve: 'science, as cultural science, negates what it promises to culture: to open up its artifacts from within' (p. 157).

The inability of science to evaluate cultural artefacts, and the intentions of science as a discipline, stand in contrast to what Adorno views as the most critical element of the essay form, namely its 'critique of the system' (p. 157). Adorno sees the essay fulfilling

the task that science set out to complete, but at which it ultimately failed. This failure of science, Adorno believes, lies in its application of unquestioned, systematic methods. The essay seeks to rectify this apparent dilemma, for

> 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 un-radical in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in accentuating the fragmentary, the partial rather then the total. (Adorno 1984, p. 157)

Adorno implies that the essay form, by ostensibly questioning the totality of the system, is able to reveal the specificities of particular cultures. That is, the essay values individual ideas and experiences and does not 'strive for closed, deductive or inductive, construction' (1984, p. 158). Conversely, Adorno (1984) argues, the 'game of organized science' rests on the flawed principle that 'the order of things is identical with that of ideas' (p. 158). Therefore the essay, in constructing the individual human experience as socially positioned/conditioned, reveals a 'consciousness [which] begins with what is nearest to it, [and] is itself mediated by the all encompassing experience of historical humanity' (p. 158).

Hence we can see two specific attributes raised in Adorno's theory of the essay form. Firstly, the essay is derived from individual experience and the exploration of individual ideas, thus,

> thought acquires its depth from penetrating deeply into a matter, not from referring it back to something else. In this the essay becomes polemical by treating what is normally held to be derived, without however pursuing its ultimate derivation. (p. 159).

Secondly, the essay is structured not by unquestioned methods, but by the free association of thoughts: Heilker's (1996) 'chrono-logic' ordering. While Adorno suggests that this has resulted in criticism that the essay is random and amorphous, he argues that this view 'assumes the giveness [sic] of totality and thereby the identity of subject and object, and it suggests that man is in control of totality.' (1984, p. 159)

For Adorno then:

> The essay, always directed toward artifacts, does not present itself as creation; nor does it long for something all-embracing, the totality of which would resemble creation. Its totality, the unity of a form thoroughly constructed in itself, is that of non-totality. (1984, p. 165)

Importantly, Adorno recognises that the essay is a form highly concerned with its presentation. 'In that respect alone' he writes, 'the essay resembles art' (p. 165). However here the connection with art stops, and in turn, Adorno suggests, the essay 'is necessarily related to theory' (p. 165). This relationship is a tenuous one though, and while the essay 'absorbs theories' it is not a 'standpoint' of the form:

> The essay swallows up the theories that are close by; its tendency is always toward the liquidation of opinion, even that from which it takes its own impulse. The essay remains what it always was, the critical form *par excellence*; specifically, it constructs the immanent criticism of cultural artifacts, and it confronts that which such artifacts are with their concept; it is the critique of ideology. (Adorno 1984, p. 166)

This critique of ideology is realised, Adorno argues, in the essay's refusal to rank concepts in some form of hierarchical structure whereby predefined meanings and methods provide an 'illusion of a simple, basically logical world' (p. 163). As a result, the essay is freed from the confinement of traditional thought structures; it can move about and explore because

> for the essay, origins have no priority over the superstructure. The essay owes its freedom in its choice of objects, its sovereignty vis-à-vis all priorities of fact or theory to the circumstance that for it all objects are equally near the centre (Adorno 1984, p. 167).

In this way, Adorno believes that the essay, unlike discursive thought, does not 'proceed blindly' (1984, p. 170), but rather is always in a process of self-reflection. Importantly, this reflection must 'not only extend to the essay's relation to established thought, but also to its relation to rhetoric and communication' (1984, p. 170); the essay's subject is an intentional one, and importantly, it must be noted, a socially and historically defined one.

Let us return briefly now to the 'disciplines' with which Lukács and Adorno link the essay. It is important to note that despite the varying degrees to which Lukács and Adorno associate the essay with art (Lukács primarily, Adorno only moderately) and science, neither 'ultimately saw the [modern] essay as pure or homogeneous; for each of them, the essay had both aesthetic and philosophical dimensions' (Kauffmann 1981, p. 184). As with Lukács, Adorno sees the development of the concept in the essay form as one of cognition (Kauffmann, 1981). But whereas Lukács sees this cognitive process taking on an artistic, and in some instances scientific dialectic (the essay as a science of the arts), Adorno 'seemed to be saying... [that the essay] is not reducible to either one, nor is it a synthesis of the two. The essay's mode of cognition is that of philosophy' (Kauffmann 1981, p. 185).

The fact that for Adorno the essay could more adequately serve the needs of philosophy than could other textual forms, does not necessarily stand in opposition to Lukács's view that philosophical texts are conceived in 'icy perfection'. Both theorists in this way were fighting against

> the academic guild [that] only has patience for philosophy that dresses itself up with the nobility of the universal, the everlasting, and today – when possible – with the primal; the cultural artifact is of interest only to the degree that it serves to exemplify universal categories, or at very least allows them to shine through – however little the particular is thereby illuminated. (Adorno 1984, pp. 151-152)

Both Lukács and Adorno stand in opposition to the privileged conceptions of knowledge claiming objective superiority and devoid of cognitive experience deriving from the personal, from life lived. Importantly, what we must recognise in Adorno's theorising of the essay form is that such a discussion, positioned against the backdrop of a 'utopia of cognition', is indeed a *utopian* notion of the essay form. That is, Adorno's examination of the essay form, as ultimately is Lukács's, is concerned with the *ideal essay*, the essay in its apparently true or pure state. The essay, however, as both Adorno (and Lukács) acknowledge, is not immune to 'corruption'.

Lukács laments the modern essayists' lack of self-reflection and inability to deeply penetrate the subject matter of their texts. This lament is seen in the form of a

nostalgic longing for a more *pure* essay form – one seen, he believes, in the work of Plato. Unlike Lukács, however, Adorno's criticism of the mid-twentieth century modern essay does not lie at the heart of a yearning 'for any past harmony or totality' (Kauffmann 1981, p. 186). Indeed, as Kauffmann suggests, Adorno's criticisms of the modern essay strongly show his Marxist positioning. Kauffmann writes:

> In Adorno's view, the [modern] essay shares the ambivalence and problematic nature of all cultural products in an age of reification. At least since the mid-nineteenth century, the artist and the art-work, the critic and the public have all been implicated in the increasing commercialization of culture... As culture became increasingly dependant on the marketplace, the essayist or cultural critic tended to assume the values of the socio-economic status quo – a process stepped up by the transition from liberal entrepreneur capitalism to monopoly capitalism and its "consumer culture". (1981, p. 181)

Aldous Huxley and the poles of the essay

Huxley (1959), like Lukács and Adorno, recognises the importance of subjective experience in the essay form. He sees subjectivity as an essential part of an essay framework which when fully utilised results in something akin to the ideal essay form. Huxley observes that the essay could be defined in terms of 'three poles'. There is 'the pole of the personal and the autobiographical; there is the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and there is the pole of the abstract universal' (p. v). Thus for Huxley there are 'predominantly' three kinds of essayist – the personal essayist; the essayist concerned with 'outward' notions of literature, science and/or politics; and the essayist of 'high abstractions, who never condescend to be personal and who hardly deign to take notice of the particular facts, from which their generalizations were originally drawn' (1959, p. vi).

Huxley argues that the presence of all three poles in an essay will determine particular examples of the essay form as those 'most richly satisfying' (p. vii). We might read into Huxley's description of each of the three poles a privileging of the personal essay and the critical essay; certainly, he does not seem to endow the philosophical essay with a great deal of merit – as an exemplar of the genre on its own, that is. On this

point, and reiterating the value of the personal and subjective Huxley (1959) considers Montaigne's work:

> Add one touch of nature and one touch of irony, and you have a comment on life more profound, in spite of its casualness, its seeming levity, than the most eloquent rumblings of the oracles. "It is our follies that make me laugh," says Montaigne, "it is our sapiences." And why should our sapiences provoke a wise man to laughter? Among other reasons, because the professional sages tend to express themselves in a language of highest abstraction and widest generality— a language that, for all its gnomic solemnity is apt, in a tight corner, to reveal itself as ludicrously inappropriate to the facts of life as it is really tragically lived. (p. viii)

And surely proponents of the essay form would agree that this is the reason for writing essays.

Roland Barthes' writerly text and the essay

Moving from Marxism to poststructuralism, we see a shift in emphasis away from the text and the author (the essay and the essayist) towards language and the reader. Yet while there is a change in ideological viewpoints, and indeed, terminology, for scholars such as Bensmaïa, the poststructuralist position on the openness and plurality of the text seems to coalesce with the practice of the Montaignean essay form. Therefore, Barthes' notion of the readerly text becomes 'obsolete' in the essay, according to Bensmaïa (1987, p.56).

In his essay *S/Z,* Barthes (1973) argues that writerly and readerly texts stand in opposition to each other. The writerly text aims to activate the reader, as a 'producer' rather than 'consumer' of the text; here the reader is given 'access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing' (p. 4). In more simple terms, the writerly text allows, or rather requires, the reader to participate in the writing act: to make meaning from the plurality and openness of the text. The writerly text cannot be pinned down, for as Barthes explains, 'it demolishes any criticism which, once produced, would mix with it: to rewrite the writerly text would consist only in disseminating it' (p. 5) and thus creating another writerly text, ensuring that this text is a 'perpetual present'. In

this way, argues Barthes, the writerly text is focussed on the process of making rather than the thing that is made; it is

> the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure. (1973, p. 5)

For a text to enable this 'writerly' function, to be an 'ideal' text, its

> networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable' (Barthes 1973, pp. 5-6).

In contrast, a readerly text is a closed text, 'produced according to the goals of this system [the closure system of the West], devoted to the law of the signified' (Barthes 1973, pp. 7-8); that is, the readerly text is produced and consumed within the context of a 'particular system of meaning' (p. 8). The readerly text for Barthes then is the 'classic' text: the writerly text, by contrast, is 'modern'.

For Bensmaïa (1987), the essay text embodies all that is writerly in the Barthesian sense. The issues that for Barthes plague the readerly text are of no consequence in the essay form, because for Bensmaïa the issues of a 'unique donor' or an 'ultimate organizer' are dissolved in the essay, given that the author and the reader exist as equals (rather than hierarchically) in the 'production' of the text. Further to this, Bensmaïa (1987) posits

> Just as there is (was) no first reading for the writing of the [essay] text and the production of its utterances, so there is no final reading: the author is no more the "master" of what he wrote than the reader is the slave of what he reads. (p. 56)

The essay text, then, is conceived by Bensmaïa as one in which the author is simultaneously both 'product and producer of his work' (p. 56) and the reader an active consumer. That is, a reader will identify and determine within the essay text the

'subject' of the text, in terms of what she gains pleasure from and identifies with. This particular kind of 'writing/reading' of the essay then

> refers to a "theory" of "subjects" irreducible to each other in which the Author appears as a *produced figure* (one of the "subjects"); from the point of view of its reading, it refers to a *multiplicity of possible readers* that defines a *new reading space* of the text: open and not hierarchized. (Bensmaïa 1987, p. 56, author's emphasis)

The essay text therefore, argues Bensmaïa, as a 'literary machine' removing hierarchies, origins and fixed/closed meanings, questions common understandings of the 'category of "thought"' (p. 57). Accordingly, it can be seen as a body of work not with one author and a set of predetermined meanings, but rather, as one 'intended to produce effects' (p. 58) – effects ultimately determined by the readers' interaction with the essay text; because in the end

> the great profusion of details, allegories, scenes, and miniature tableaux constituting the text have no other purpose: it is a matter, here and there and through chance encounters, of making the reader recognize (herself in) a "scene of language", and take an active part in the text she reads. On every page, the essayist seems to be telling the reader: among the figures the text offers you here, it is up to you to pick and choose, and to leave the rest (Bensmaïa 1987, p. 59)

This points to a utopian view of the essay form and seems to beg the question, 'What therefore of the "corrupted" (Lukács's term) form which does not seek to be reflective/personal, flexible, open, and yet still claims essay status?' Bensmaïa's argument is still applicable because she is concerned with the Montaignean essay – an 'ideal' essay. It is in this context that Bensmaïa sees the potential for the essay to realise Barthes' writerly text. The above issues therefore share similarities with Kauffmann's assertion that what is at stake here are utopian ideals – for Lukács (and Adorno) a utopia of cognition, for Barthes one of language/texts, and for Bensmaïa, perhaps both.

Feminist perspectives

The issue of subjectivity is undoubtedly a recurring theme in examinations of the essay. This is true also in the theories and ideas of feminism. However, under the feminist project, subjectivity within the essay becomes *ultimately political*, argues Mowitt (1989). Yet for Mowitt, the understanding of subjectivity is not a straightforward affair. Subjectivity, she argues, like the essay genre, is situated within a historical and contextual framework that has shaped and influenced the ways in which it has been considered. Mowitt suggests that: 'subjectivity is intrinsically organized by its public forms of expression and is therefore no less historical than those very forms' (p. 274). Therefore, she concludes, any theorising of the essay form must take into consideration not just the history of the form itself, but also the history of the principles by which such a form is examined. In holding up the essay, or any discursive structure for that matter, as a form in which subjectivity takes an apparent stance against notions of objectivity, one must consider that

> avoiding a reductive ideological view creates the responsibility of clarifying how the production of essays nonetheless fits within the structure of institutions and practices that condition the social efficacy of literary discourse with regard to subjectivity. (Mowitt 1989, p. 274)

As Mowitt argues, the value of subjectivity within the essay is largely dependent on a broader cultural framework that either accepts or rejects (to varying degrees) the subjective approach within a text. Of course these cultural frameworks are not singular, nor static, and therefore one 'institution' may be more likely than another to embrace the subjective text. To this end, the ways in which subjectivity is discussed (that is, forms part of the institutional discourse) also becomes specific to particular institutions and their textual practices.

For Mowitt, the essay is necessarily subjective, because it is the fusion between the 'production of written discourse' and the 'delimitations of intentions' – authorial and generic. This brings into play another set of 'ideas' relevant to the text, because for Mowitt the writer as essayist is influenced by the nature of the discourse in which they

choose to write – in this case the essay as 'subjective' or 'personal'. Therefore the essayist is 'called upon to authorize judgements – judgements which have, as a consequence of this subjection to discourse, no decisively "literal" ground upon which to base themselves' (Mowitt 1989, p. 275). Thus, there lie within the very nature of the subjective essay form complex issues regarding authority, as in the authorising force, of the discursive text.

Similarly, the issue of authority and subjectivity is of concern to Joeres and Mittman (1993). Like Mowitt, they argue that the essay is a form which 'allows and indeed assumes a personal presence' (p. 19) and is one that therefore carries with it an inherent link to individual experience. For Joeres and Mittman too, the expression of the 'narrative "I"' is political. They consider the subjective experience as 'the/an authorizing force in the essay' (p. 18) and this, they imply, calls into question dominant, *patriarchal* discursive structures. Considering the feminist perspectives of/on essay writing by women, Joeres and Mittman argue that in examining the essay form, one must question not only notions of authority achieved through the writing of the subjective experience, but importantly, the *kinds* of experiences written in essays. Thus the differences and similarities shown in the subjective experiences within the essay provide an important mechanism for determining how the authority of the narrating "I" is constructed. This understanding of subjectivity, they suggest, provides an alternative form of criticism: one outside of the genteel, white male world the essay has historically occupied. That is, we can arguably consider notions of the narrating 'I' and subjective knowledge in the essay form as having moved, in some cases, beyond bourgeois individualism, to an understanding of the individual as an ultimately political subject. 'Political' here implies 'the politics of certain constructions of self and of that self's expression' (Joeres & Mittman 1993, p. 18).

For Mowitt, Joeres and Mittman, the essay offers the feminist project something quite specific and real to the foundations of the discipline/ideology:

> the unsystematised nature of the essay, its spontaneous and almost accidental quality, its assumed opposition to doctrine, disciplinary thinking, its focus on personal experience, its cultivation of diversity, its stress on particularity, its

> "happy inheritance of meaninglessness"... , its concern with knowledge that is intimately connected with the author, its emphasis on objects and the importance of things... when one reads the critical literature on essays, one quickly gains a sense that whereas essayists, the actors and agents, are almost always defined very clearly as "masculine," the essay itself is placed over and over again into a space that is uncannily feminine, at least as the qualities adhering to the "feminine" have been defined since the eighteenth century. (Joeres & Mittman 1993, p. 19)

For feminist proponents of the essay then, the essay itself offers a politically radical text – a highly suitable means by which to further the feminist dialogue.[13]

In consideration of theory...

Marxism, poststructuralism and feminism all stake a claim for subjectivity (and therefore a particular cognitive act) in the essay as something of a privileged state – privileged over other *less* subjective texts resulting in *different* cognitive acts. All of these theories show a yearning for a utopian text – one potentially realised in particular instances of the essay. Kauffmann agrees, reiterating that the supposition that the essay bears in it a form of cognitive function can be seen as far back as Montaigne. In addition to what we see as Montaigne himself attempting to order and understand his world through the writing of personal experience, it is his use of the term *essay* that Kauffmann finds revealing. We know that the term '*essai*' was used by Montaigne to designate what he perceived as the 'attempts' or 'trials' in his writing: but Kauffmann (1981) further suggests that examples of the use of the term in Montaigne's work, like that of 'On the resemblance of children to their fathers' in which *essai* appears

> alternatively as a noun, a transitive verb, and a reflexive verb [shows that] these basic semantic coordinates postulate both a kind of cognitive activity – one which is tentative rather than conclusive – and a subject of that activity, the "essaying subject". The essay is thus a cognitive probe into some area of experience. (p. 13)

However, Kauffmann also cautions that it is dangerous to assume that the essay form can be defined in terms of an 'absolute or primordial kind of cognitive experience,

[13] This notion is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, 'Voices from the edge – the silenced do speak'.

because there is no a priori, immutable *subject* of cognitive experience' (p. 19, author's emphasis). For Kauffmann then, there is value in examining the essay in terms of cognitive experience, but with the view that such experience is not necessarily to be privileged over other ways of knowing – or indeed other non-subjective manifestations of the essay.

The convergences and divergences that we see in the theories of, and applicable to, the essay form here are, in many ways, indicative of their historical positionings. That being said, we can see within these theories useful entry points into the essays examined for this project. Arguably, no one theory outlined above can, or should, provide a completely adequate 'theory' of the Australian essay, and certainly this project is not about locating one. However, it is necessary to position this discussion of the contemporary Australian essay within a historical and theoretical context of the essay form such that we have an understanding of and ability to work with what Kauffmann (1981) describes as 'conditions of possibility' (p. 11).

Thus far, however, these 'conditions of possibility' have been framed in decidedly theoretical and philosophical terms. Given that a significant part of this research project is concerned with a close analysis of specific examples of the contemporary Australian essay, it becomes necessary now to consider a methodological approach to such texts. Importantly, 'methods' of textual analysis do not exist outside of the realm of theory; rather, they are very much intertwined. If as Joeres and Mittman have stated (and others have reiterated), the essay is *theoretically* 'spontaneous', 'personal', 'diverse', 'literary', and 'subjective', resulting in a particular cognitive experience; we then require tools, a methodological approach, to locate and examine how and to what effect these elements have in particular manifestations of the genre.

Part II

Approaching the text

Chapter 3

Conceptual and theoretical frames for analysing and interpreting the essay

The Best Australian Essays collections, as Chapter 5 shows, present a wide variety of essays ranging from the personal essay in the Montaignean tradition through to what Heilker terms the thesis-support form, or the article. These two kinds of 'analytical nonfiction', the *essay* and the *article*, can be viewed, Heilker (2006) argues, 'as opposing extremes on a continuum of possibilities and choices for framing and developing our prose' (p. 192). There are, in *The Best Australian Essays* collections 2000-2008, 322 essays of differing possibilities and choices.

Because of the depth and breadth of the essays published in *The Best Australian Essays*, a multidimensional framework for analysis is necessary. These essays reveal differences in literary approach, subject, context, and authority (a term used here in its most open sense), and as such a multiplicity of 'ways in', both theoretical and methodological, is necessary to begin to talk meaningfully about the individual essays analysed, the collections compiled by each of the editors, and the status of the Australian essay more broadly.

Presented in this chapter are the methodological approaches utilised in the analysis of both *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008 collections, and the seven individual essays selected. These approaches consider the author, the reader and the text, arguably the primary elements, history has shown, around which the theories of literature are based[14] – albeit to greater or lesser degrees depending on the theory in question. Over time different movements have sought to privilege certain of these elements: in

[14] See for example Eagleton, T 1983, *Literary Theory: an introduction*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford; Pope, R 1998, *The English Studies Book*, Routledge, London.

simple terms, the text-centred approach of Formalism, Modernist views of author as creator and meaning maker, and Poststructuralists' claims for the birth of the reader. These theories today serve to indicate both the fluidity of this field, and its contemporary status, that is, that all meaning is essentially plural. With this in mind, this project does not seek to privilege or dismiss the text, author or reader. Rather, the concern here is to explore the ways in which these intricate sets of relationships affect and effect the production and consumption of texts, and the ways in which these might be analysed to determine the position of the contemporary essay in Australia.

Utilising the theoretical work of Rosenblatt (1978) on aesthetic and efferent texts, and Iser (1978) on affect/effect in the reading act, we see how the text and the reader work in a contextual partnership. These theories then enable a consideration of the individual essays within *The Best Australian Essays,* and the collections more broadly, by providing a language, and the criteria, for discussing essays that claim genre status but do not take up, for example, the personal/sceptical Montaignian model.

Arguably too, the work of Rosenblatt and Iser overcomes, to some degree, the difficulty in giving a voice to the reader in this project. While I have not sought to explore the reading of contemporary Australian essays[15] with the reading public, Rosenblatt and Iser both argue that we can gain an understanding of suggested/implied readings via specific markers within the text. In this way, broad assumptions about potential readings of the essay can be made which are not arbitrary.

Following on from the discussion of Rosenblatt and Iser, a rhetorical framework for analysing the Australian essay is examined. Such an approach is useful because it enables consideration of the essay as a genre, as a social form, and as a text in context, to which the writer and reader can relate. We therefore turn to the work of scholars

[15] This project seeks to map the territory of the contemporary Australian essay generally, and as such, it encompasses a relatively broad range of issues related to the creation of social texts – as particular texts in particular historical moments. In this way, the analysis of readers' thoughts and interpretations of the texts examined here is beyond the scope of this study. However, the reader is recognised as an important and influential member of the social text relationship.

who have, in the past two decades, provided new ways of defining and utilising rhetoric – culminating in a movement dubbed by Enos and Brown (1993) as *New Rhetorics*. In this examination, the work of James Berlin on social-epistemic and his 6-step framework for textual analysis is highly pertinent to the analysis which takes place in Chapter 5. In support of Berlin's framework, I also consider an example of a new rhetorics approach to analysis in Richard Fulkerson's examination of *Newsweek's* 'My Turn' columns. This serves to show how such an analysis might work and what it in turn, reveals.

Also relevant to a rhetorical approach, I examine Hesse's (1989) work on narrative as rhetoric's fourth mode. Hesse considers story to be an important rhetorical feature in the personal essay and suggests that a consideration of narrativity in such texts, and also those 'dissimilar' to the personal essay, reveals both differing consequences of meaning and experiences with the text/s.

In addition to the examination of both a new rhetorical approach and narrative rhetoric, in this chapter the work of Swales (1990), Freedman and Medway (1994), and Miller (1994), on genre, will be considered. Their position validates the examination of the essay, *as a genre*, in this project, despite the apparent difficulties associated with 'defining' the essay. Furthermore, the work of these scholars provides a methodological framework for considering the essay in terms of its genus, enabling varied examples of the essay to be discussed in a meaningful way; as Swales, Freedman and Medway, and Miller point out, genre encompasses more than simply *style*.

The methodologies examined here provide varying, yet inherently linked ways of considering the contemporary Australian essay. This analytical framework is multidimensional and reveals how the relationships between the text, the author and the reader can be understood as individual to the reading act, but also as one necessarily located within complex social, cultural, and historical contexts.

The essay and its readers – efferent and aesthetic approaches

Rosenblatt's (1978) notion of efferent and aesthetic reading provides a useful way of drawing the reader into the examination of the essay. In addition, her theory of reading enables a discussion of the reader and the essay text across a range of essay *types*. Rosenblatt argues that reading acts vary in terms of reader intent, attitude, and experience of the text, and that such variations are attributable to a number of factors relevant to both the reader (as an individual and a community member), and the text. In simple terms, Rosenblatt suggests two essentially polar reading acts – efferent reading and aesthetic reading. The efferent reader, according to Rosenblatt (1978) aims to

> Get through the reading as quickly as possible and to retain the information that will serve her practical purpose. She is interested only in what the words point to – the objects, ideas, and actions designated. Her own response to these concepts or to the rhythm of the sound, or associations of the words are of no importance to her, and indeed the more she ignores these, the more she makes herself impersonal and transparent, the more efficiently she reads. Her attention will be concentrated on what is to be assimilated for use after she has finished reading. (p. 24)

Rosenblatt's example of a highly efferent reading act shows a mother reading for first aid instructions after her child has swallowed poison. However, Rosenblatt (1978) suggests that similar, if less 'powerfully motivated', readings can be seen to occur in the process of reading 'a history book, a cooking recipe, a newspaper article, an algebraic equation or a chemical formula' (p. 24). In this sense, an efferent reading act is one in which the reader seeks the information contained within the text to 'carry [that information] away from the reading', in order to undertake particular actions or to adopt a certain stance at a later time – to write a history paper about a particular historical event, to make the dish delineated by the recipe, to adopt a pro/anti stance toward an issue reported in a newspaper, and so on.

On the other hand, an aesthetic reading act is one concerned not with responses enacted after the reading event, but rather with what happens at the time of reading. According to Rosenblatt (1978), the aesthetic reader, like the efferent reader

> Must decipher the images or concepts or assertions that the words point to, [but] he also pays attention to the associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas that these words and their referents arouse within him. "Listening to" himself, he synthesizes these elements into a meaningful structure. *In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centred directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text.* (p. 25, author's emphasis)

Given an acknowledged *active reader*, Rosenblatt (1978) reminds us that a 'text may be read either efferently or aesthetically' (p. 25) despite particular textual cues that might indicate a preferred type of reading act; for example, a poem would usually suggest an aesthetic reading approach. Because the reader is active, it is not simply the text that determines an efferent or aesthetic reading act, but rather the reader's focus of attention. Thus, as Rosenblatt suggests, a mathematician might 'aesthetically savor' the grace of an equation, while the English student might efferently analyse the linguistic features of a poem (p. 25). Furthermore, any reading act is not limited solely to an efferent or aesthetic reading; rather reading may occur anywhere on what can be imagined as a scale between the two. Rosenblatt asserts that 'the reader's stance toward the text – what he focuses his attention on, what his "mental set" shuts out or permits to enter into the centre of awareness – may vary in a multiplicity of ways' (1978, p. 35).[16] Thus our mathematician and English student are not limited to the one kind of experience; indeed the mathematician's reading of his equation may be closer to efferent, imbued only slightly with a hint of aesthetic 'pleasure'; or, perhaps, vice versa. We see, therefore, that the kind of reading act experienced is largely dependent on the reader and both her competence with particular linguistic formations, and response to non-verbal settings (this may include the kind of publication in which the text appears, through to the physicality of the setting in which it is consumed).

[16] The terms his/her will be alternated for clarity and ease of reading, and to ensure gender neutrality, where appropriate, throughout this project.

In accepting that the reader will determine to a large extent the 'gradation' of his efferent or aesthetic reading, Rosenblatt cautions that this should not be viewed as an attempt to diminish entirely the role of the text in this communicative transaction. She (1978) asserts that,

> When the reader adopts an aesthetic stance, clearly some texts will yield a greater reward for his attention than others. To adopt an aesthetic stance toward the items in a newspaper or toward the directions for constructing a radio, is possible, but would usually be very unrewarding... often the literary experience is indeed more complex, more nuanced, more intense, because of the presence of certain stylistic devices or formal traits. (p. 34)

Rosenblatt further suggests that textual markers provide cues through both linguistic structure, and physicality – its printing and presentation. A notion of this physicality can be seen quite obviously in poetry. A poem often (although not always) adheres to particular conventions: specific lines and stanzas, for example. These serve to clearly mark a text as *poetic*, and therefore, signal through 'visual cues', a preferred stance towards the text: in this case, aesthetic. Rosenblatt reminds us that linguistically there are also 'traditional cues' which predict an aesthetic reader response, such as 'a decided or regular rhythm, special kinds of diction, devices such as alliteration, and, in both traditional and more recent writing, decided departures from normal syntactic patterns' (p. 83). Furthermore, Rosenblatt observes that the material or content of a particular work with relation to description, character development, setting, time, atmosphere and tone are suggestive of the 'need' for an aesthetic readerly stance (p. 83).

Though the reader's journey through the text is largely self-determined, the author and the text itself, for Rosenblatt, remain intrinsic to the relationship:

> The importance of the text is not denied by recognition of its openness. The text is the author's means of directing the attention of the reader. The author has looked at life from a particular angle of vision; he has selected out what he hopes will fulfil his aim, as Conrad phrased it, to make you see, to make you hear, to make you feel. The reader, concentrating his attention on the world he has evoked, feels himself freed for the time from his own preoccupations and limitations. Aware that the blueprint of this experience is the author's text, the

> reader feels himself in communication with another mind, another world. (1978, p. 86)

The reader's two-sided approach to the text

Iser's (1978) theory of aesthetic response shares similarities with Rosenblatt's positioning of the reader and the text. Iser (1978) employs the themes of affect/effect as a means of describing the act of reading. Like Rosenblatt, he insists that there is no single, inherent meaning in a text: 'there is no common code' (p. 21). What *does* function within a work of fiction for Iser (and arguably one can extend his theory to the essay form) is a 'two-sidedness: it is verbal and affective' (1978, p. 21). He suggests (1978) that we can understand these two sides of the reading act to function in the following ways:

> The verbal aspect guides the reaction and prevents it from being arbitrary; the affective aspect is the fulfilment of that which has been prestructured by the language of the text. Any description of the two must therefore incorporate both the structure of the effects (the text) and that of response (the reader). (p. 21)

As Iser (1978) states, meaning is conceived of as 'something that happens' (p. 22), rather than something that is inherent in the text. However, he, like Rosenblatt, recognises that the reader's response is not arbitrary; rather, the text acts as a 'blueprint' (Rosenblatt) for all of the potential meanings possibly gleaned, but not in the 'absolutist' (Iser) sense whereby the text is viewed 'as the objective embodiment of an ideal standard' (Iser 1978, p. 23). It is this latter point that is of particular interest – in Iser's view any notion of an 'objective ideal standard' is problematic. As he points out, whoever, in the end, is deciding on the 'objectivity' and 'ideality' (the most likely candidate, suggests Iser, would be the critic), is always and ultimately a reader making 'judgements [that] are based on his reading' (Iser 1978, p. 24). In this way, Iser argues, any value judgments about a text (whether it is good/bad, in/out) can only ever be substantiated by 'criteria that are not values in themselves, but simply denote features of the work under discussion' (p. 24). Furthermore, Iser posits that

> We may even compare these features with those of other works, but in differentiating between them we are merely extending the range of our criteria, which still does not constitute a value. The comparisons and differences only

> serve to condition the value judgement and cannot be equated with it. (1978, p. 24)

Iser's statements serve to remind us that any examination of the text is based on a set of value judgements, and mark only one of an infinite number of possibilities of 'effect'. Such judgements are not in this sense arbitrary, but they are ultimately *subjective.*

From readers to rhetoric and genre

Rosenblatt's and Iser's discussions of reading acts and the construction of meaning within this transaction provide this project with a means by which the reader can be considered in a valuable way, whilst not, for the purposes of this examination, requiring input from actual readers. As Rosenblatt and Iser point out, texts contain particular cues, or textual markers, that signal a preferred kind of reading experience. In the following section then, I move from Rosenblatt's and Iser's discussions of these cues, and begin to consider the specificity of the textual markers and how they might be seen to operate. An important point to be carried from the proceeding discussion is Iser's caution that what I will go on to consider, in terms of 'features', will ultimately result in a value judgement of those features, that must always be contextualised as subjective, though *not* arbitrary. The approach to textual analysis suggested by a new rhetorics perspective enables consideration of the kinds of specific textual markers implied above, in a way that facilitates and validates the subjectivity of the process. The following section then examines the frames for textual analysis outlined by a new rhetorics approach.

Rhetoric and a *new rhetorical* approach to textual analysis

The term 'rhetoric', suggests Bazerman (1993), is one that travels with much baggage. There are those, he argues, who wish to limit the term to a number of more

'traditional' interpretations,[17] and others who 'wish to transfer ownership and legitimacy of the term to new projects' (Bazerman 1993, p. 3); projects removed from traditional practice, or divergent enough in their approach to rhetoric that they may be viewed as 'nonthreatening'. In all such instances, Bazerman (1993) believes that there are two shared concerns: 'First is a concern for how symbols are used as a medium of social exchange and the material of individual formulation and expression... the second... is an orientation toward practice.' (pp. 3-4)

The repeated relevance of rhetoric's place in the social sciences and humanities can be appreciated, Bazerman suggests, when one considers that

> Questions of language use are becoming ever more central to the social sciences, for individual language events are being perceived as the location where interaction happens, society and culture are reproduced, languages are reinvented, and cognition focused and transferred to public symbols. Moreover, as agency and action return as core concepts in the social sciences, the orientation of speech and writing departments toward strategic language use establishes a strong basis for research. (Bazerman 1993, p. 6)

Andrews (1992), like Bazerman, argues for the contemporary relevance of rhetoric and rhetorical analysis. For Andrews, rhetoric encompasses not just the 'techniques of composition', 'language acts' or the persuasive nature of 'all communication', but also 'rhetoric is concerned with *the arts of discourse* and with context' (p. 5, author's emphasis).

For Bazerman (1993) and Andrews, the idea of a 'new rhetoric' is able to encompass 'all enquiries into the use of symbols', and thus whilst the term *rhetoric* may be loaded with baggage and history, contention over the particular prescriptions and practices of rhetoric in terms of 'who is in and who is out' (p. 7), is perhaps far more useful if

[17] We see this in Rosenblatt (1978) when she suggests that part of the confusion surrounding efferent and aesthetic reading acts might have been prevented/resolved if Aristotle had prevailed 'in his restriction of "rhetoric" to persuasive speech or writing' (p. 89). Here Rosenblatt seeks to restrict the understanding of persuasive speech or writing to an efferent effect, by limiting both the sense in which rhetoric, and indeed persuasive writing, apparently function in the communicative act. It is not a view of rhetoric or persuasion shared here, however, it is arguably one prevalent for a greater portion of the twentieth century.

considered holistically: 'let us see what our contending viewpoints together reveal about skilled human discourse' (Bazerman 1993, p. 7).

Social-epistemic rhetoric: theories and models for textual analysis

James Berlin argues, in Enos and Brown's (1993) *Defining the New Rhetorics*, that 'rhetorics differ from one another' (p. 138), and that this difference is realised in the ways in which the relationships between sender, receiver, message and language function are negotiated. As a practitioner of what he terms 'social-epistemic rhetoric', a branch of rhetoric situated within the 'new rhetorics' approach, Berlin (1993) asserts that this kind of rhetorical analysis shares with poststructuralism a 'placement of language, of signifying practices, at the centre of the rhetorical act' (p. 138). Thus instead of

> Portraying the language of discourse as the mechanical product of prior decisions made regarding the nondiscursive domains of sender, receiver and message...

in social-epistemic rhetorical analysis

> All three of these domains are considered to be constituted by language. In other words, signifying practices precede and circumscribe the entire rhetorical context so that the sender, the receiver, and the message are always already linguistically constructed. (Berlin 1993, p. 138)

What social-epistemic rhetoric, and new rhetorics more broadly, offer this project, then, is a method of analysis which enables the signifying practices revealed in contemporary Australian essays to form the central component of the analysis, but always and necessarily looking beyond the text itself to the larger signifying practices at work: those of the author and the reader, and the context of the text's production/consumption.

Berlin's practice of social-epistemic rhetoric, that is to say, his methods and processes for textual analysis, involves six steps. These steps indicate entry points into the text, but in doing so, do not necessarily limit the kind of meanings or effect any particular

text might have on an individual reader. Berlin's steps of analysis are paraphrased below:

1. Locate key terms and situate these within the enthymeme of the text
2. Step 1 is then positioned within the narrative/structural form suggested by the text
3. Step 2 is then further situated within larger narrative structures (economic, political, cultural)
4. The text is then read in the context of an effect on 'me' as this relates to determinations made in 1-3
5. How is the text situated within a genre 'code' and what consequences of meaning does this carry?
6. What textual features can be revealed, and what consequences of meaning do these carry? (1993, pp. 147-51)

It is arguably not necessary for the components of a rhetorical analysis such as that prescribed by Berlin to take place in the exact order he has prescribed above, and indeed some readers/critics will inevitably find particular steps more pertinent to the process of rhetorical analysis in varying contexts. This rhetorical approach does not seek to reveal an apparently fixed or closed text, but rather one in which the insights gained from the analysis will inevitably vary for each individual examination. Such an open approach to analysis is perhaps rather obvious in step 4, where there is the positioning of the individual reader in regards to the 'me effect' (constituting an individual as socially and culturally located), which, of course, has implications for all the other facets of this, and indeed of any, analysis.

Berlin's six steps are utilised in Chapter 5 in the analysis of the seven selected essays from *The Best Australian Essays* collections. This analysis, as intimated above, does not always follow the order of analysis suggested by Berlin. In my implementation of Berlin's framework, the individual essay texts seemed to suggest the order and, importantly, the extent to which each of the six steps were implemented as a means of analysis. This is notable, for example, in the analysis of Catherine Ford's essay

'Introduction to a Filthy World' where the 'me effect' described in step 4 featured as a dominant aspect of the analysis. Conversely, the analysis of Robert Manne's composite essay 'Exclusionary Nationalism' centres on step 2, and in particular, step 3.

While the analysis of the selected essays in Chapter 5 draws strongly on the Berlin framework outlined above, other approaches to rhetorical analysis have also been implemented. Fulkerson's (1993) textual analysis of the 'My Turn' columns, examined below, shows an 'alternative' kind of analysis, and is revelatory as one of many potential examples of a new rhetorics approach 'in practice'. Fulkerson's framework is useful particularly in regard to his discussions on rhetorical genre, authorship, authorial stances, and structures and strategies. These discussions help to further inform the analyses in Chapter 5. A summary of Fulkerson's framework is given below and provides a useful background for understanding a new rhetorics approach.

An example of a new rhetorical approach in practice

Fulkerson's (1993) textual analysis, discussed below, centres on *Newsweek*'s 'My Turn' columns, a kind of 'opinion/editorial', written by *Newsweek*'s readers. The 'My Turn' columns appear to share similarities with the essay genre, and as such the categories into which Fulkerson separates his 12 sample columns as a means of beginning 'detailed rhetorical and stylistic analysis' (p. 229) of the texts is of interest. Fulkerson suggests a rhetorical analysis according to topic, authorship, authorial stance, and strategy and structure. This framework is outlined in the following five points:

1. *Topics of 'My Turn' columns*

   Topics here can be understood as the main 'issues' addressed by the text, although these topics do not necessarily constitute the enthymeme of the text. The topics for the 'My Turn' column include 'international issues', 'national issues' (such as public policy and tax), and 'social topics/problems' (such as disease, education, marriage, race, families). The nomenclature of the sub-categories under the topics listed above is not fixed – one might prefer to place 'education', for example, under the topic of 'national issues', depending on individual preference and/or

context. However, these are the topics/sub-topics listed by Fulkerson, and they serve as a beginning for the mapping of the terrain of his texts and textual analysis. Locating the topics of the 'My Turn' columns shares similarities with Berlin's rhetorical analysis steps 1-3, although Fulkerson's examination at this level is far less detailed.[18]

2. 'My Turn' columns and rhetorical genre

Fulkerson is interested here in a broader definition of genre; that is, one not limited to 'shared content and shared exigence'. In this sense Fulkerson is much more interested in a Bakhtinian understanding of genre in which particular discourse communities act to construct 'relatively stable' 'utterances'. Fulkerson (1993) suggests that 'to publish in *Newsweek*, one must practice *Newsweek* rhetoric'; thus 'When social constraints lead to repeated uses of similar rhetorical moves or features (logical, structural, stylistic, tonal), a rhetorical genre exists' (p. 231). This notion is certainly comparable with Berlin's fifth element of rhetorical analysis (i.e. situating the text within a genre code).

3. Authorship of 'My Turn' columns

The third section of Fulkerson's analysis deals with the institution of authorship – namely, who gets published. For Fulkerson, this is an important issue because the 'My Turn' columns purport to be open to 'everyone'; yet Fulkerson's examination shows that authorship is predominantly limited to 'prominent public figures... lawyers... business executives... freelance writers or professional journalists... and college professors... (primarily white males)' (p. 232). The 'My Turn' columns, therefore, by way of publishing a particular kind of writer, place a value on the views and opinions of a specific group of people – a value that ultimately positions this group as a kind of authority on *issues* of assumed public interest. The issue of authorship (who gets published and who does not), is also relevant, as Chapter 5 shows, in *The Best Australian Essays* collections.

[18] This is arguably not a fault in Fulkerson's work, but points to differing objectives in his research – he is attempting to locate the defining generic features of the 'My Turn' columns. In this case, Fulkerson asserts (and this may point to the lack of 'detail' for this part of the analysis), that the 'topics treated' did not 'help to define the genre' (Fulkerson 1993, p. 230).

4. Authorial stances of 'My turn' columns

We can understand authorial stance here to encompass both the way in which the author as subject is located within the text, and the way in which authority – 'grounds for expertise' – is constructed. The categories of authorial stance from the sample 'My Turn' columns suggested by Fulkerson are:

a. Celebratory stance

In this stance we can see a bad experience/issue ultimately revealed (through time or the process of self-reflection/examination, for example) to have positive outcomes ('hope and reconciliation or growth'). Authority here is linked to the telling of a personal experience.

b. Participatory exposé by an insider

Fulkerson suggests that this stance is critical and serves to highlight a negative phenomenon with the view to an 'increased understanding and awareness' among the readership. Again authority is realised through the narrative of personal experience.

c. Observer portrait of a problem

This stance is linked also to a negative phenomenon, but in this instance, suggests Fulkerson, the author is not positioned as a 'victim'. Thus authority within the text is revealed not through personal experience ('what it was like for me'), but through logic and argumentation contextualised with observation.

d. Correcting illusions

Here, Fulkerson suggests, the author adopts the most 'overtly argumentative... approach' through both author 'observation and experience to dispute a widely held view' (p. 234). Thus for Fulkerson, whilst personal experience provides an element of authority, the apparent authorising force of these texts rests predominantly on the presentation of the argument in a more aggressive, logos-centred manner.

5. Strategies and structures in 'My Turn' columns

This section of Fulkerson's analysis identifies the 'developmental strategy' of the 'My Turn' pieces. All, he suggests, tend towards a 'representative anecdote', or a 'story'. As a consequence Fulkerson argues that the 'My Turn' columns have an

'epistemology... based on personal experience as knowledge rather than any attempt at empirical or authoritative validation'.

There is, therefore, a strong coalescing between 'My Turn' columns and the essay (and the theory of the essay) apparent here. The notion of strategies and structures points also to similarities with Berlin's sixth element of rhetorical analysis; although it is arguable that Berlin's 'textual features' and 'consequences for meaning' suggest a more thorough examination than Fulkerson's 'strategies and structures' may seem to imply.

'Narrative rhetoric': the persuasive value of stories

Fulkerson's notion of 'representative anecdote' as a rhetorical textual feature can be seen alongside Douglas Hesse's (1989) work on narrative and rhetoric, as validating the relevance of a rhetorical approach to textual analysis, particularly of the essay genre. Hesse's work in *Narrative and Argument,* in which he argues for both the significance and future of 'narrative rhetoric', is pertinent. He believes that narrative in the personal essay is a 'form of persuasion' and that the way in which such persuasion can be seen to function within this genre is more complex – or perhaps better, less simplistic – than other 'traditional' views of narrative and personal writing might imply. The traditional view, argues Hesse, positions *mimesis* as the determining factor in the persuasive act. Hesse considers this traditional view naïve; and calls for a reinterpretation of *mimesis*. Here he defers to a definition of *mimesis* in Aristotle's *De Poetica* as the 'representation of action' (Ricoeur 1984, p. 34), which Hesse suggests has to do with emplotment, and stands in opposition to the 'shallow interpretation' whereby *mimesis* is seen to be 'copying the world in words' (Hesse 1989, p. 112). This notion of emplotment is important because it is central to the story's form. For Hesse, the organisation of events as 'stories in essays' persuades, not because they are mimetic (in the traditional sense), but because the 'story' is a form familiar to and identifiable by readers.

> At the heart of persuasion in essays, then, is a relationship between writers and readers that pivots on the conventions of storytelling and storyreading they bring to texts. (Hesse 1989, p. 113)

And further to this:

> Stories convince not because they are life-like but because they are story-like. The power of narrative in essays comes from assertions offered in a shape that is attractive because it is so familiar. 'Story' is a form of narrative argument in a way that 'syllogism' is of logical. (Hesse 1989, p. 115)

The kind of persuasion taking place in narrative for Hesse is then both formal and conventional; the stories within essays act as 'proof' of the apparent propositions (experience as authority), and the conventions of storytelling persuade because their form (the story) is an inherent part of how we know and come to understand the world in which we live.

Argument through narrative, or 'Narrativity' as Hesse terms it, openly involves the reader in the persuasive act. The reader is an active participant in the work of persuasion because

> narrativity involves them in the enterprise of the essay. The result is a rhetorical advantage similar to the one that accrues with such strategies as 'showing, not telling'. Inviting, even forcing, the reader to construct a sense of order in the texts makes him or her complicit with the writer. Power comes to writers when they give essays the shape of a story because of a fundamental disposition that we have toward stories. The rhetorical value of stories then, is participatory, not logical. (Hesse 1989, p. 114)

Hesse (1992) argues that narrative ought to be considered as the fourth mode in rhetoric, alongside pathos, ethos and logos. Part of this theorising lies in the notion that all language acts seek to persuade, to greater or lesser extent, and that 'all discourse, even the aesthetic, argues for a version of things - at the very least its own legitimacy' (1992, p. 36). The proposition that narrative, as the act of storytelling, has the potential to persuade through its form as story, and readers' interactions and expertise with stories, is an interesting one. By conceiving narrative as rhetoric's fourth mode, in essays such as Donald Horne's 'Mind, Body and Age' we can see how

the narrativity, or story, acts as the defining persuasive element and what consequences of meaning this carries. Furthermore, Hesse's framework for considering narrativity in the essay enables comparisons with essays, and the 'arts of discourse' and context, which do not offer a strong element of narrativity. Indeed, on this point, Hesse's work on narrative and rhetoric is highlighted as being particularly useful to this project when he asserts, with regard to rhetorical practices and the essay form: 'We would do well to begin analysing texts most like personal essays, then move out to narrative analysis of those apparently dissimilar' (p. 115). As we see in Chapter 5, essays such as Richard Flanagan's 'The Rape of Tasmania' contain little narrativity, using instead other rhetorical elements to persuade, providing the reader, therefore, with a different textual *experience*, one that ultimately, in considering Berlin's step 5 above, has consequences of meaning in relation to the essay's position within the 'genre code'.

Genre and textual analysis

Within the understanding of rhetorical practice positioned in this chapter, that is, how to put into practice a new rhetorical analysis, there are also broader implications at the *genre* level, as intimated above. In consideration of genre as ultimately a form of categorisation, contemporary discussions reveal that genre, too, is in a process (perhaps continual) of renegotiation/reinterpretation.

Swales (1990) offers a working definition of genre in which he has proposed five categories or 'short critical observations' about the apparent meaning and function of the term genre 'for others to use, modify or reject as they think fit' (p. 45). Swales' definitions are outlined below:

1. *A genre is a class of communicative events*

   Swales identifies a 'communicative event' as one in which the discourse, the participants (senders and receivers), the process of production and reception and its context (immediate and historical), and the role of the discourse itself are fundamental to any notion of the 'event'. In turn, a 'class' of communicative

events usually 'need[s] to have prominence within the relevant culture to exist as a genre' (p. 46).

2. *The principal criterial feature that turns a collection of communicative events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purposes*

This criterion stands in opposition to the view in which genre can be identified by the apparently primary feature of *form*. Rather, Swales argues that locating *purpose* as a 'principal criterial feature' enables more 'independent and open-minded investigation' of genres and individual texts, and therefore provides 'protection against facile classification based on stylistic features and inherited beliefs' (p. 46). Here, we can understand purpose to be conceived as the 'achievement of goals'. Interestingly, Swales suggests that genres such as some forms of poetry and those classes of communicative acts 'whose appeal may lie in the verbal pleasure they give' (p. 47) are not always suited for categorisation via purpose. In such instances, he argues, these forms 'can thus be separately categorized by the fact that they defy ascription of communicative purpose' (p. 47).

3. *Exemplars or instances of genres vary in their prototypicality*

In this instance, Swales argues that within particular genres there are 'typical category members' which fit neatly and easily into a particular class of communicative act. There are also those that do not (indeed some 'genre exemplars' explains Swales, appear to belong to other classes altogether); and there are those which fall somewhere in between. Thus, for Swales, the 'definitional cluster approach' in determining membership within a genre is preferable. That is, as Swales (1990) explains it, whilst 'communicative purpose has been nominated as the privileged property of genre[,] other properties, such as form, structure and audience expectations operate to identify the extent to which an exemplar is prototypical of a particular genre' (p. 52).

4. *The rationale behind a genre establishes constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their content, positioning and form*

Swales' clarification of this point is informative and succinct, and therefore worth quoting at length, because it sets up the justification for the continued perception and existence of the concept of genre, despite the well documented 'blurring of

boundaries' that has enveloped most issues of taxonomy since poststructuralism. Swales (1990) writes:

> Established members of discourse communities employ genres to realize communicatively the goals of their communities. The shared set of purposes of a genre are thus recognized – at some level of consciousness – by the established members of the parent discourse community; they may be only partly recognized by apprentice members; and they may be either recognized or unrecognised by non-members. Recognition of purposes provides the rationale, while the rationale gives rise to constraining conventions. The conventions, of course, are constantly evolving and indeed can be directly challenged, but they nonetheless continue to exert influence. (pp. 52-3)

5. *A discourse community's nomenclature for genres is an important source of insight.*

For Swales, 'active discourse community members... have the greatest genre-specific expertise... One consequence is that these members give names to classes of communicative events that they recognise as providing recurring rhetorical action' (p. 55). Such nomenclature offers a study of discourse communities and the genres therein, the potential for a greater understanding of their cultural and social practices. However, such insights can only be reasonably gained, cautions Swales, through 'further validation'. That is, the naming of a genre may be more 'institutional' than 'descriptive', and indeed, as we know, labels 'tend to persevere against a background of substantial change in activity'[19] (p. 55). Any attempt to uncover the insights able to be gleaned from the naming of genres must, therefore, take such factors into consideration.

What underlies the motivation for genre analysis vis-à-vis Swales' 'critical observations' is a process of 'illumination' rather than 'classification'. Freedman and Medway (1994) share Swales' conviction, suggesting that

> Genre studies are a particularly promising instrument for illuminating the social process in its detailed operation, and afford an opportunity we should not refuse of examining what it means to be part of an institutional process. For despite the superficial familiarity of the institutions in which... genres are to be found, the experience of those who write, read and act on the [texts]... is not something we

[19] A clear example of this is the previous discussion of the rhetoric – a label behind which a significant amount of change and activity has occurred to reinvent/redefine rhetoric and rhetorical practice (although not in a manner completely devoid of its historical underpinnings).

> know much about in ethical and political terms... So we need to ask specifically, what does participation in a genre do to, and for, an individual or group? (p. 12)

Swales' theory of genre shares much with that of Miller (1994 [1984]). Miller argues for a 'sound definition of genre' centred on the notion of rhetorical action. Thus genre for Miller, as for Swales, is conceived of as a set of discursive conventions set out by particular communities 'as ways of "acting together"' (p. 36). For Miller, the 'features' that constitute this particular understanding of genre are:

> 1. Genre refers to a conventional category of discourse based in large scale typification of rhetorical action; as action, it acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose.
> 2. As meaningful action, genre is interpretable by means of rules; genre rules occur at a relatively high level on a hierarchy of rules for symbolic interaction.
> 3. Genre is distinct from form: form is the more general term used at all levels of the hierarchy. Genre is a form at one particular level that is a fusion of lower level forms and characteristic substance.
> 4. Genre serves as the substance of forms at higher levels; as recurrent patterns of language use, genres help constitute the substance of our cultural life.
> 5. A genre is a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence; it motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent. (1994, p. 37)

For Miller, situations are 'social constructs that are the result, not of "perception", but of "definition"' (p. 29). Human 'action' in turn is guided by meaning or interpretation. Therefore, if rhetorical action 'acquires meaning from situation', a situation is not a 'real, objective, factual event', but rather one construed, based on an individual's existing body of knowledge.

The hierarchy Miller refers to in point 3, implies a hierarchy of 'theories of meaning'. For Miller, meaning, 'pragmatic value as action' (p. 32), is constructed through a complex relationship between form and substance. In this sense we can see genre 'as meaningful action that is rule governed (which is to say interpretable by means of conventions)' (Miller 1994, p. 34). Genre can be located within a hierarchy of meaning because it is made up of the

> Constitutive rules that tell us how to fuse form and substance to make meaning and regulative rules that tell us how the fusion itself is to be interpreted within its contexts, like religion or public affairs. (Miller 1994, p. 35)

What Miller is suggesting, therefore, is that genre be considered as social action because form (as symbolisation of substance) and substance (relating to the signification or 'meanings' of a discourse) interact and are interpreted by rules and conventions determined by particular discourse communities and exigence. Miller conceives an exigence as:

> a form of social knowledge – a mutual construing of objects, events, interests and purposes that not only links them but makes them what they are: an objectified social need... Exigence is a set of particular social patterns and expectations that provides a socially objectified motive for addressing danger, ignorance, separateness [for example]. It is in an understanding of social need in which I know how to take an interest, in which one can intend to participate... exigence [is] understood as social motive. (1994, pp.30-1)

Miller argues that form and substance operate at various levels on the hierarchy of meaning but that, as in point 4 (p. 37), the fusion of the two at 'higher levels' constitute genre. Importantly, and this encompasses the latter half of point 4 and point 5 wholly, Miller (1994) posits that

> if we define genre by its association with recurrent rhetorical situations, the exact hierarchical level at which the abstraction called genre occurs will be determined by our sense of recurrence of rhetorical situations; this will vary from culture to culture, according to the typifications available. (p. 36)

Miller's proposed hierarchy is seen on the following page:

Human nature

Culture

Form of life

Genre

Episode or strategy

Speech act

Locution

Language

Experience

Figure 2 Miller's proposed hierarchy of meaning (1994 p. 35)

Form and substance can be seen to operate within the hierarchy above in the following figure devised by Miller.

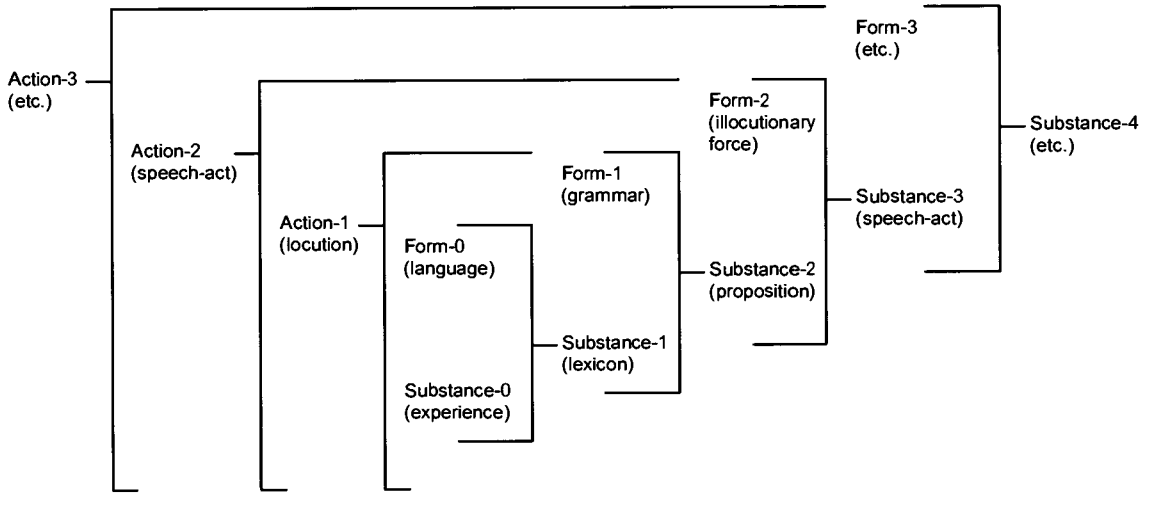


Figure 3 Hierarchical relationships of substance, form, and meaning as action. The combination of form and substance at one level becomes an action (has meaning) at a higher level when that combination itself acquires form. Each action is interpretable against the context provided by actions at higher levels. (Miller 1994, p. 33)

This figure implies that genre, which we would consider as an action (as is locution, or speech-act, in Figure 2), takes form as a result of the 'fusion' between form and substance at a lower level on the hierarchy. As Miller explains, this 'Action' can then be interpreted by higher level 'Actions'. Thus genre is interpretable within the context, referring to Figure 2, of, for example, form of life or culture. Miller's examination of

genre highlights its inherent link to rhetoric in terms of the arts of discourse and context.

Thus, the notion, and indeed the claims, of genre are shown to be important to this project because they have implications relating to meaning (at various levels of the hierarchy) for the production and consumption of individual texts. That is, a text claiming the status of essay (as a genre), suggests the use of particular rules and conventions regarding form and substance at the lower levels of a hierarchy of meaning. However, this claim, and indeed the rules and conventions that point to particular forms and substances considered appropriate to the essay, must be examined within the higher levels of, for example, culture, which of course may inform substance and form at the lower level, and the *form* of genre at the mid-level. This process is necessarily circular, in that substance, form and action (as genre) also serve to reveal much about the nature of form of life, culture, and human nature. Miller (1994) summarises the relevance of genre analysis, which for the purposes of this project, serves to highlight the applicability and significance of such an analysis to research on the Australian essay. She writes that:

> As a recurrent, significant action, a genre embodies an aspect of cultural reality. For the critic, genres can serve both as an index to cultural patterns and as tools for exploring the achievements of particular speakers and writers. (p. 39)

The discussion above points to the inherently social nature of texts – they are artefacts that act as a measure of a community's culture and its members' 'achievements'. The essay in Australia is then to be seen as an aspect of cultural reality through which we can begin to map the cultural patterns evident within the essay text, and also the production and consumption of such texts.

From the essay as social text, to the essay as an *Australian* social text

This chapter outlines the methodological framework utilised in the analysis of *The Best Australian Essays* and the seven selected essays from these collections. This framework combines the theories of efferent and aesthetic reading, a new rhetorical approach,

narrative rhetoric and genre theory, to reveal the way in which contemporary Australian essays can be seen, indeed should be seen, as products and producers of cultural 'patterns', 'realities' and 'achievements' – a complex relationship between text, author, and reader – one which is always culturally, historically and socially positioned.

I move on now from a methodological approach to textual analysis and begin to consider, in greater detail, the contexts within which the contemporary Australian essay can be located. As such, the following chapter takes on the task of examining the essay in Australia, and the discourse communities and institutions that both affect and effect the kinds of essays written and published and their resulting value within these said communities and related institutions.

Part III

Literature and the essay in Australia

Chapter 4

The essay in Australia: framing perspectives

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first of these covers the condition of the contemporary Australian essay from the late 1990s onwards, looking at issues of power, ideology, institutions and discourse communities. The second section examines the history of the essay form in Australia beginning in the late 1800s, then moves through to the establishment of notions of an Australian literary "canon" during and post World War II, and continues on to the "culture wars" of the 1980s. It should be noted that, unlike the English essay for example, there is very little by way of a documented history of the essay in Australia. Subsequently, the history of the Australian essay presented in the following chapter is contextualised within a broader literary and publishing history. These "histories" are significant to the Australian essay and inform the analysis carried out in Chapter 5, however, it should be noted that the history of the Australian essay here, is far from complete. Indeed, given the scant amount of historical work dedicated to the essay in this country, it is argued in Chapter 6, that a comprehensive historical examination of the essay in Australia points to possibilities of further research.

In the first section of this chapter, particular interest is paid to Davis's (1999) examination of, and unease with, the gatekeepers of the nation's essays, a group he describes as a 'liberal coterie'. He accuses this group of using the essay (and associated discussions thereof) to accumulate status and power in the public sphere. Similarly, Carter's (2001) discussion of the essay in Australia is examined. He picks up on Davis's unease and furthers this issue, claiming that the essay is problematised not just by notions of a liberal coterie but also by its current status as a highly marketable lifestyle product, the result of which sees the essay traverse a complex set of relationships between aesthetics and ethics.

Armstrong's (2000) alternative view of aesthetics is then examined in light of Carter's arguments above. She argues that while aesthetics have been largely ignored, or positioned as highly suspicious, by contemporary theory, the aesthetic can be seen to have a quality that is inherently intrinsic to life and experience. Thus, while extrinsic notions of the aesthetic still circulate, the intrinsic is not necessarily tied, like the extrinsic, to notions of power and ideology.

Following on from this, Kirklighter's (2002) and Mittlefehldt's (1993) assertions that the essay can be, and has been, used as a powerful mechanism for the traditionally silenced to speak out, is offered as an alternative view to that of Davis, who sees the contemporary Australian essay as dominantly Eurocentric, hegemonic and marginalizing. We can see, then, that what is a stake, as always, is the available appropriations of the essay for particular reading publics.

This latter issue ties into notions of the essay as a social text acted and acting upon the communities in which it circulates. These ideas are examined in light of Anderson's (1991) theorising of literary nonfiction and discourse communities, and Fairclough's (1995) model for discourse analysis. Both Anderson and Fairclough, although each frames their argument differently, see issues of representation and interpretation as social in nature. Ultimately therefore, particularly for Fairclough, representation and interpretation are inherently linked to issues of ideology and power.

In section two of this chapter we turn from the contemporary to the historical, for it is here that we can trace the source of the many and varied attributes of the cotemporary Australian essay, its contestations, and its complexities.

This section begins with an examination of the few publications that trace Australia's essay history. In these texts we see a concern for the broader history of the essay, particularly the influence of Montaigne and the early English essayists, and a national development of the essay – one largely associated with journalism. With this latter

point in mind, it is also important to note that the development of the Australian essay can be seen in conjunction with the development of an 'Australian literary dialogue' – a necessary conversation/movement concerned, as Carter (2000) claims, with issues of colonialism and institutionalisation, Australian stories and Australian texts. This resulted in the establishment of Australia's first literary magazines, and, suggests Carter (2000), the rise of the Australian public intellectual.

This section examines the relationship between the literary magazines and the essay; one that is notable from the 1940s onwards, becoming more significant in the 1990s and highly important from 2000 onwards.

As is revealed in the latter part of this chapter in the discussions of Docker (1984), Lee (1998), Carter (2000), Turner and Bird (2001 [1982]) and others, the development of the essay and the Australian literary dialogue, and its associated texts and institutions, has resulted in something of a deep-seated and continuous academic/amateur dichotomy; whereby two far from distinct groups struggle to come to terms with, and claim authority over, the Australian essay – historical and contemporary.

Part I

Revival and problematics of the contemporary Australian essay

Carter (2001) makes a number of claims about the essay genre, in its contemporary guise in Australia. He argues that the essay has grown significantly in popularity since the 1990s and that it is a genre that has been appropriated by 'public intellectuals' and academics alike. Carter (2001) believes that this rise in popularity can be seen in the increasing number of publications that fall, some more loosely than others, under the umbrella of the essay. The range of essays covers the 'public and intimate, momentous and mundane' where 'often the topic is less important than what we

might call the "writerly performance"' (p. 3). These are not new claims for the essay, nor is it surprising that across a range of essay publications we might see the scope Carter suggests, regardless of any specific national context.

In this climate of apparent 'unprecedented development' in the essay market, both Carter's (2001) and Davis's (1999) discussions of the cultural conditions in which this development is seen to occur are highly important to this project. Of particular interest are the practitioners, the publications and the cultural positions which Carter and Davis see as impacting significantly on the manifestation of the essay in this historical moment.

Gangs at work

In his 'selective' inventory[1] of essay collections (both single-author collections and anthologies) published between 1994 and 2001, Carter lists 29 books (2001, p. 3). This list forms part of what Davis derides as a 'clique' and a 'coterie' that sets up a particular group as authors and reviewers of the essay texts in question. On this point of the so-called *coterie*, Davis (1999) is worth quoting at length because it sets the framework for his argument about the gatekeepers of the essay form in Australia:

> Garner's *True Stories* was reviewed by Morag Fraser, Peter Steele and Peter Craven. Les Murray's book was reviewed by Peter Craven. Modjeska, Lohery and Dessaix's *Secrets* was reviewed by Morag Fraser and Peter Craven. Fraser's *Seams of Light* was reviewed by Peter Craven and Luke Slattery. It contains essays by Robert Dessaix, Helen Garner, Kerryn Goldsworthy, Les Murray, Barry Oakley

[1] This assertion of a selective inventory is an important one. Essay collections, single author and anthologies, are not always easy to locate, particularly if "essay" does not appear in the title. As Hesse (2003) writes, and as discussed previously in Chapter 1, 'cataloguing creative nonfiction [essay] is a haphazard venture' (p. 2). This is most often the case because the essay (and creative nonfiction) are not generally considered in generic terms (like fiction or history, for example) when determining placement on the shelves in bookstores or in library catalogues. A search of the Australian National Library database for 'Essays/Australian' yields 13,000 + results on 697 pages – results including more well-known publications such as *The Best Australian Essays* and collections by our more prolific essayists, to texts like *Twelve Essays on Australian Subject Bibliography*; the latter certainly having no concern for the essay genre as it is considered in this project. The issues of nomenclature and the essay no doubt play a significant role in the apparent difficulty associated with cataloguing of essays; resulting in the unfortunate consequence that would-be-readers often find essays difficult to locate. In this way, an inventory such as Davis's (1999) or Carter's (2001), or that presented later in the chapter, relies on knowing practising essayists (the coterie), keeping a keen eye on literary reviews and advertising in literary magazines, and sometimes, luck. Essays in Australia, even when one goes in search of them, and as the editors of *The Best Australian Essays* assert, are not always easy to find, and no doubt some good examples get missed in the searching.

> and Peter Steele. *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays* was reviewed by Morag Fraser and Luke Slattery. It contains essays by Robert Dessaix, Helen Garner, Kerryn Goldsworthy, Les Murray, Barry Oakley and Pierre Ryckmans. Craven's *Best Australian Essays 1998* was reviewed by Kerryn Goldsworthy, Barry Oakley and Peter Steele. It comprises many essays previously published in *Quadrant* under Robert Manne's editorship and *Eureka Street*, edited by Fraser, and includes essays by Helen Garner, Robert Manne, Drusilla Modjeska and Pierre Ryckmans. Dessaix's *And So Forth* was reviewed by Peter Craven and Morag Fraser... This is a culture that clearly fears being forgotten. (p. 4)

Certainly Davis (1999) does not seek to hide his disdain for what he believes is the revival of the essay as a means for 'coterie liberalism' to reinvigorate its status as a 'relevant social force' (p. 4). Although Davis is careful not to categorise all of the essays and essayists published in these anthologies in this way, conceding that 'some are very good', he remains deeply concerned with the 'gangs at work' (p. 4) practices that seem to surround these texts. The prevailing issue for him is not the essays published in these essay collections, as good or bad examples of the form, but rather the implicit argument that holds the essay up as 'an apparent necessity of this particular moment' (p. 4) by a specific group of people who seem have much to gain (in Davis's view) by doing so. Part of the criticism in the claim for the essay genre as it has been taken up in contemporary Australia, lies in what Davis sees as a Eurocentric framing of the form.

Eurocentric aestheticism and the silenced voices

There is a truth to Davis's assertion that there seems to be an obsession with defining the essay form, and in doing so, conjuring up the father figure of Montaigne, in the edited essay anthologies published in Australia. However, this is also true in other non-Australian, not necessarily European, collections; it is not a new practice in this regard.[2] Davis (1999) also contends that, linked to this Eurocentricism is the apparently conflicting polarity between content and aesthetics. In Davis's view, many

[2] See the introductions to Gross, J (ed) 1991, *The Oxford Book of Essays*, Oxford University press, Oxford; Lopate, P (ed) 1995, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Anchor Books, New York.

of the essays in these collections are either one or the other, aesthetics driven or content driven, political or emotional, worldly or interior (p. 4).

On the face of it, Davis's argument in 'Assaying the Essay' has two key impetuses; firstly, to draw attention to the institution of authorship, in the poststructuralist sense, evident in the contemporary Australian essay 'scene'; and secondly, to stake a claim for other kinds of essays: the 'contemporary academic essay' (p. 7) and essays written by Indigenous Australians, and other 'non-white voices', including 'Asian voices', and 'southern European voices' (pp. 6-7). That these are not represented signifies, for Davis, worrying silences in the Australian essay collections recently published. These collections, as he points out, declare themselves as concerned with issues of nationality, multiculturalism, and Indigenous history, but these voices do not get heard, rather

> it seems that despite all the good intentions, representativeness, here, still means "speaking for" people using only those voices already legitimized by the aesthetic framework... The aesthetic is already ideological in so far as it privileges the values and 'tastes' of a particular class, defining the essay accordingly. (Davis 1999, p. 7)

Davis's concerns are valid ones; he is right to ask '*Where are the 'other' voices?*' But he does run the risk of privileging one kind of essay over another when he derides that 'certain aesthetic style' employed by the so-called 'gangs at work'. This style, ostensibly grammatical, beautiful, coherent, 'abstractly personal' and descending from Montaigne (p. 7), sets up an aesthetic which by the process of excluding Aboriginal, and other 'non-white' voices, Davis (1999) claims, 'tends to mean (but doesn't always mean) that Aboriginal writing... [is] ungrammatical/ unbeautiful/ incoherent/ directly biographical' (p. 7). That the exclusion is evident[3] is not in doubt, but in deriding one aesthetic (if we work on Davis's apparent premise that 'other' voices offer up 'other' aesthetics) Davis does exactly that which he is arguing against, namely he privileges via the process of exclusion. This exclusion can be seen in the attempt to

[3] In the context of essay collections published before 1999.

silence his 'gangs at work' via a rhetorical approach that parodies the practices of these essayists as soft, old fashioned, servile (to the European canon), and indulgent.

There is, however – as has been examined in previous chapters – a substantial history attached to the essay form, which, as Kauffmann (1981) asserts, needs to be considered in theoretical discussions of the essay. Indeed, for Kauffmann, not to consider the historicity of the essay form is to 'reify' it, and thus *not* recognise that as a genre the essay is 'highly unstable and heterogenous' (1981, p. 2). By *not* considering the history of the essay, by failing to value the significance of the essay's links to Europe and Montaigne, Davis becomes guilty (by Kauffmann's criteria) of that which he himself condemns; an apparently ill-conceived definition of the form.

Aesthetic commodities and ethical implications

Davis's apparent grievance against the aesthetic dominance of the pre-1999 essay collections is associated with what Carter (2001) describes as an issue of 'good taste'. The 'phenomenon' of good taste in contemporary Australian culture is, Carter suggests, at once 'an effect of sophisticated lifestyle marketing' and also 'a means for making social distinctions' (p. 5). However, he is not dismissive of the 'effects' of taste, suggesting that it constitutes not simply 'mere taste', but rather a

> significant new dimension in Australian book culture... Taste constitutes a *habitus*. A new set of tastes means a new set of social relations. The effects are at once cultural and commercial. (2001, p. 5)

These effects are further realised, Carter suggests, in other inherently linked trends such as literary festivals, literary prizes, and 'good book stores', all of which have experienced 'unprecedented growth' in recent times. Within this new cultural formation, the essay, along with memoir and the contemporary literary novel, has become what Carter describes as an 'eroticised commodity' (p. 5). These essays, memoirs and literary novels are cosmopolitan, stylish, ethically engaging (pp. 5-7) and, further to this, Carter posits, they reflect a 'new form of an old project, the linking of interiority and public issues, of history and politics through *reading*' (2001, p. 7). As part of this new cultural formation, or cultural 'shift', as Carter describes it, 'public

intellectual[s]' have risen to prominence. This group of public intellectuals forms Davis's 'liberal coterie'.

Carter (2001) agrees with Davis's premise that the essay as practised by Australia's public intellectuals does have a 'gangs at work' (Davis's term) feel to it, suggesting that they appear as 'exercises in containment, mustering dispersed cultural capital into the top paddock' (p. 10). However, for Carter, the contemporary Australian essay collections, whilst orientated towards 'high European' culture, have a much broader potential of 'cultural and social effects' than simply reiterating one 'clique's' apparent cultural authority. Nonetheless, the contemporary Australian essay for Carter has the potential to be uplifted by ethics and simultaneously destroyed by aesthetics. Carter demonstrates these dualities in his discussion of Inga Clendinnen's (1999) *True Stories*. The potential ways in which the text may be read, and the effects of such readings, are, he suggests, both 'complex and unpredictable'. This can be seen in his assertion that

> On the one hand, readers are invited by the personal mode of address to 'do history' with her and thereby to take responsibility for the consequences of the histories which constitute them as citizens. (2001, p. 10)

And while Carter endorses this kind of reading, he sees something potentially more sinister at work – ethics that can be overwhelmed by aesthetics. In this way

> Essays on Australia's treatment of Indigenous populations or genocide can then be consumed within the same taste culture and for much the same kind of pleasures as those fine contemporary literary novels, the self-help and lifestyle manuals, the travel and cook books, alongside which they're shelved in the good book stores. (2001, p. 11)

The apparent tensions between aesthetics and ethics are, as Carter notes, complex. The aesthetic, he cautions, cannot be written off as an effect that is 'merely aesthetic' (p. 11). As he asserts in relation to Clendinnen's *True Stories*, the aesthetic has a rhetorical value beyond, in the narrow sense, beauty and art. The aesthetic can be a vehicle through which broader understandings and different knowledges are conveyed. In this regard, the contemporary Australian essay, which often seeks to put forth a 'kind of public ethical discourse' (p 11) framed by 'high' aesthetics, has the

potential to do *good.* But the reverse is also true if, as Carter suggests, the aesthetic significantly overrides the implicit ethical implications of the text. For Carter, there are also losses when the value of research is replaced by an admiration for the writerly performance, 'The aura surrounding the public intellectual is the aura of the aesthetic, embodied *personally* not professionally' (p. 12).

The notion of consumerism, of ethics, aesthetics and the so-called "good taste" lifestyle market, raised by Carter, is an interesting one in that it complicates the essay genre. This can be seen most notably in those manifestations which offer up the essay as more obviously nonfiction given that the notions of truth and ethics in the nonfiction text are (at least in 'preferred reading' terms) more palpable than in that of fiction.

The issues surrounding notions of consumer culture are examined by Lury (1996) and are worthy of some discussion here. For Lury (1996), what defines 'consumer culture' as we perceive it is the 'stylization, or aestheticization' (p. 77) of consumption. This in essence refers to the style or aesthetics bound up, indeed now inherent in, the production and subsequent consumption of cultural commodities.

'Aesthetic production' is certainly highly visible in particular manifestations of contemporary literature. As Carter asserts, texts such as Modjeska's (1994) *The Orchard,* originally presented in hardcover, with a 'high production value... and art-house [in] design' are seen as 'precious objects' (2001, p. 4); as things of high aesthetic value. Further to these aesthetics of production, as Lury argues, the way in which these commodities are then consumed has also become aestheticized in that as cultural objects, also associated with our daily needs, they reveal a particular 'grouping's taste or sense of style' (p. 80). This serves to distinguish one group from another and is therefore linked to 'struggle[s] over social positioning' (Lury 1996, p. 80). In this sense, the struggle for class or status played out in the current trend for the attainment of a particular 'lifestyle' (achieved largely through the consumption of specific goods) is inherently linked to aestheticism inasmuch as the aesthetic value (here, style and good taste) forms the markers of that lifestyle.

Carter's concern is further legitimised when we consider that cultural products such as literature are inherently tied to this lifestyle market, and ultimately therefore to struggles of social position. Lury argues that consumers 'actively' participate in the consumption of goods, and thus their decisions about the products they purchase and consume are not arbitrary. These notions, as Carter notes, are linked to Bourdieu's (1977, pp.82-83) concerns with *habitus*, and in particular the understanding that all members of society participate in the struggle to claim status via the taste and style implicit in their choice of lifestyle (Lury 1996, p. 83).

Bourdieu claims that we are always in a contest for social status, perhaps best understood in terms of a claim for the legitimacy of that status, and that we all form part of a society which is inherently consumerist (whether we accept, reject or are unaware of this premise). We are, then, for better or worse, tied up in the aesthetic implications of this consumerism, and thus the 'ethical' is always going to be mediated to some degree by this aestheticism. That is, it would seem to be difficult to consume any goods of potential ethical import outside of the aesthetics of a 'lifestyle' culture, whether or not the products themselves might be considered in terms of, for example, 'high' aesthetics.

There are seemingly two particular concerns with aesthetics here: those extrinsic and those intrinsic to the product. But both of these formations are determined to greater or lesser degrees by the reader (in the case of the text) as both active consumer *and* meaning maker. There are correlations here with Rosenblatt's (1978) aesthetic and efferent reading. This can be seen specifically with regard to her assertion that whilst the text and context of its consumption (including its design, and the act of consumerism) offer preferred kinds of reading, ultimately the reader will determine whether a text is read aesthetically, efferently (Rosenblatt's terms) or somewhere in between (p. 25).

We can consider that the external aesthetic forces at work are those that serve as indicators of good taste or style as it relates to a given 'lifestyle'. By contrast, the internal aesthetics could be understood as those implicit within the product (here an

essay text), namely, the literary quality of the work. While both are problematic terms, the 'literary quality' is always a value judgement, as are the aesthetics that define 'good taste' in relation to lifestyle. However, what is important is that neither aesthetic is necessarily wholly dependent on the other. In this sense one can imagine an essay text purchased for its apparent value as a lifestyle product, which, whilst fulfilling this purpose as a marker of lifestyle, fails to ignite any sense of literary pleasure in the reader. Similarly, a text may be consumed 'outside' of the aesthetics of one's particular lifestyle group (indeed it may be a marker of another lifestyle group altogether) and be a thoroughly fulfilling literary experience. Importantly, here an individual may be a member of multiple 'lifestyle' groupings, and thus the latter point is perhaps best read in terms of a dominant 'lifestyle' choice.[4] What this points to is an aesthetic of value, and of experience.

Armstrong (2000), in examining the concept of aesthetics, suggests that what is required in the aftermath of 'Marxist, cultural materialist, post-structuralists, and deconstructive psychoanalysts' (p. 1) who found the category of the aesthetic to be highly 'suspicious', is a rethinking of that very category. In this regard, Armstrong does not set out to debase the achievements of these theories, but she does signal a considerable unease with that part of theory which has set out to 'empty' the 'content' of an understanding of aesthetics, without then seeking to replenish that content. What she advocates, therefore, is not a traditional understanding of the category of aesthetics as sublime, beautiful creation, but rather a rethinking that positions the aesthetic as having 'democratic and radical potential' (p. 2). There are a number of premises on which Armstrong's arguments are based. She believes that firstly, regardless of theory, aesthetic creations have and will continue to exist and be produced; secondly, in adopting an anti-aesthetic model, contemporary theory has refrained from forming new ideas about notions of the aesthetic and as such 'leaves one without resources of analysis in contemporary culture' (p. 2); and thirdly, the

[4] This notion can arguably be demonstrated by the notion of 'secret pleasures' – products which an individual likes, admires, finds aesthetically pleasing, for example, but which are largely considered as 'bad taste' or 'bad style' amongst their dominant lifestyle grouping.

resultant space left for the discussion of aesthetics has been subsequently, and the implication here is, worryingly, left open to the 'reactionaries'.

In 'changing the terms of the argument', Armstrong (2000) proposes that aesthetics are not a 'bourgeois subject' dependent on class, but rather that

> From the moment of birth, the aesthetic is an inherent experience, prefigured in the very process of living and inscribed in the body. Thus the potential for responding to and making the aesthetic is in everyone, possibilities held in common by the process of being alive. *Arousal* is the cause and effect of experience and the aesthetic alike – and it occurs everywhere in our lives, in the experience of a crowd at a ball-game, for instance, [or] in the gratuitous poking of the embers of a fire... (p. 162)

In reconfiguring the 'place' of the aesthetic, as inherent in everyone, Armstrong seeks to democratise it.[5] Importantly, Armstrong's argument is underpinned by the assertion that the 'aesthetic *value* is class related cultural capital' but it is 'aesthetic *experience* [that] is universal' (p. 161). Therefore, the *experience* of the aesthetic is not bound up in issues of acquiring cultural capital. In this regard, and in considering Guillory's work on cultural capital, Armstrong (2000) writes:

> Cultural producers will still compete to have their products read, looked at, listened to. Judgement would not disappear. Nor, therefore, would the disposition of value which Guillory deems indispensable to the aesthetic and the artwork as we know it in our culture. On the contrary, we would simply reform the hierarchical conditions of the practice of judgement and allow *everybody* to judge. (p. 161)

It is unclear, however, how and when these hierarchical conditions will be 'reformed' such that the aesthetic *experience* overrides that of traditional notions of *value,* resulting in the said shift which enables everybody to 'judge'. As Armstrong herself points out in relation to the scepticism of the aesthetic, particular theories do not necessarily translate into practical application. It is, as James (2005) notes, an unclear distinction in that the relationships between the reconfigured notion of the aesthetic, as experience, and issues of democracy, as a shift in the values attached to our consumer

[5] This was a concern of Adorno's, expressed explicitly in regard to the essay genre.

culture, are 'never satisfactorily articulated' in terms of how this process might be actualised.

There can be no doubt that collections such as *The Best Australian Essays* are targeted at a particular lifestyle market, one closely linked with Carter's notion of 'literary festivals' and 'good book stores'. The fact that the essay circulates within a complex consumer culture, while simultaneously offering a 'public ethical discourse', raises some perplexing questions. However, Armstrong's consideration of aesthetic *value* and *experience* does offer something of a framework in which the aesthetic and ethical can co-exist, without significant detriment to each other. Yet a notion of aesthetic value will continue to pose a dilemma, given that it will always effect, to varying degrees, the cultural context within which particular texts, here, the essay, are consumed.

The issues of aesthetic commodities and ethical implications are important to this project, and they have specific implications for the examination of any notion of 'literary nonfiction' (assuming that the literary is imbued with aesthetic qualities) in our consumer culture. Carter (2001) is very careful not to destroy the aesthetic as an effect that is *merely aesthetic*, because there is the potential for positive outcomes. However, there remains a discomfort, which we have seen in regard to consumer culture and ethical discourse, but it is a discomfort also with a notion of writerly performance, one that is necessary for us to now consider.

Writerly performance can be seen to take on two guises: Carter (2001) is concerned with the writerly performance evident both within the text, and outside of the work – what Barthes and Foucault ostensibly refer to as the institution of authorship. We can see this in Carter's (2001) claim that Australia's public intellectuals embody the 'aura' of the aesthetic '*personally* not professionally' (p.12). In this way, then, the public intellectuals, as 'celebrity' intellectuals, are positioned overwhelmingly as the 'moral authority', it would seem, on any number of issues. The problem with this, as both Carter and Davis note, is that this 'celebrity' status which marks these individuals as

the experts on our nation's history, politics, ethics and aesthetics, inevitably silences others who also have significant contributions to make.

On the issue of authorship, Carter's (2001) concern is inherently linked to the 'dangerous' assumption, by public intellectuals themselves, that they are free agents, without ties to any particular institution/s (in the narrow sense). The problems with such assumptions, according to Carter (2001), are realised in both the ostensible 'disdain for the marketplace and popular culture' and the actual 'celebration of the [public] intellectual as outsider' (p. 9). What such a position fails to recognise, he argues, is the place of such intellectuals within the public sphere, as appropriations of the marketplace and popular culture. They are, after all, popular and profitable authors and journalists dependent on the institutions of commercial media. Furthermore, as self-proclaimed outsiders, the assertion of institutional independence has the tendency to turn into 'attacks on *different* publics and different kinds of intellectuals' (Carter 2001, p. 9). There is then, in the public intellectual sphere, as implied by Carter, and most certainly Davis, a rather obvious lack of self-reflexivity resulting in what Carter describes as 'something a bit "off" about their "moral independence"' (2001, p. 9).

Ultimately Carter's concerns are not about genre, as such. As he (2001) notes

> The memoir [and the essay is implicated here, also] is a performative genre. It evokes the process of ethical reflection. However provisional and open-ended, it offers itself as exemplary... there is a receptive audience of self-fashioning readers in contemporary Australia disposed towards the kind of ethical work essays and memoirs typically perform. I think we need to value the spaces and styles opened up in the public culture by such writing and reading. (p. 12)

Carter's assertions are valid. The negotiation of the personal and the public in the broader national/international sense is ultimately a negotiation of the ethical. There are aesthetics associated with this, in terms of authorship, consumerism and the literary work itself, and the way in which Carter considers these, such that the aesthetic has the potential to override the ethical, is important. Indeed in considering these issues, we are forced to take a closer look at the consumerist culture in which

we participate, our own role in this culture, the visibility of certain speakers and the gatekeepers of our countries' ethical debates, and also, importantly, the potential of the literary work to offer more than simply an aesthetic reading.

Voices from the edge – the silenced do speak

Davis and Carter frame their discussions of Australian public intellectuals, and the kind of essays they produce, as limiting the scope and opportunities for other non-white, non-liberal, non-public intellectuals to emerge from the silent spaces they ostensibly create. In this regard it would seem too easy to criticise a genre which is inextricably linked with bourgeois European culture. There is no doubt that the essay has historically, and even in more contemporary times, been accused, and indeed complicit, in the reinforcing of hegemonies and the disguise of ideology through the use of a 'seemingly unproblematical plain style' (Kirklighter 2002, p.1). However, as Carter cautions us, it would be a mistake to assume that the essay has limited potential because of the way it has (or indeed has not) been appropriated.

Certainly, the essay form has potential beyond Davis's liberal coterie, although this does not make his discussion less valid or important, for his concerns are legitimate, as demonstrated by the reaction to his book *Gangland*. However, as Kirklighter (2002) is at pains to highlight in her book, *Traversing the Democratic Borders of Essay,* the essay genre has a history of more radical and democratic formations, particularly as it has been practised by Latino/a (Kirklighter's term) essayists.

In many ways, Kirklighter's work on the essay form shares sympathies with the issues examined by Davis. She too recognises that, as a genre, the essay form has been predisposed to the reinforcement of 'institutional and patriarchal hierarchies by privileging essayists from elite Western European backgrounds' (2002, p. 1). Clearly the emphases in Kirklighter's and Davis's arguments differ, but they share a common concern, namely the apparent dominant textual practices which particular individuals and institutions have tied to the essay genre. In seeking to make a space for the Latino/a (Kirklighter's terminology) essays (essays that have been widely studied and

critiqued in Latin America but not in American and European scholarship), Kirklighter points out that these essays offer a different perspective on the genre. While remaining personal, Kirklighter argues that the Latino/a essayist is concerned less with issues of style and 'literary craftsmanship' and more with the essay as a 'social and political form of writing that [has] played an instrumental role in shaping both national and personal identity' (2002, p. 72). Furthermore, and importantly, Kirklighter notes that 'the distinction between the "I" and the "we" in this nation-building process of the essay seem less important than the merging of identities to better society' (p. 72). As a 'tool' for nation building, and as an examination of the political, social and ideological, Kirklighter sees the essay in its personal, self-reflexive, spontaneous, and sincere form as a means by which renowned Latino/a essayists such as Paulo Freire were able to

> critique the ills of elitism and support the democratic ideals that served the masses... to persuade audiences to incorporate some of these elements [the personal, self-reflexive and spontaneous etc] as a means of critiquing their immediate global society (p. 74)

Kirklighter's book begins with a chapter addressing the personal and the political in the work of Montaigne and Bacon, and in doing so points out that these authors were also concerned with a textual mode that 'served to explore and question the dramatic changes in Renaissance politics, science and religion' (2002, p. 10), although both appropriated the essay differently. Her discussion of both traditional European and US essayists in relation to less-well known (outside of Latin America) Latino/a essayists, demonstrates, in the context of this project, that as a genre the essay is effectively utilised by 'other' non-European essayists.

This discussion has also been taken up by Mittlefehldt (1993), in her examination of female African American writers and the essay form. Indeed this discussion begins with two very powerful sentences: 'Essay. Weapon.' (p. 196). The premise of Mittlefehldt's argument, as with the overriding argument of *The Politics of the Essay,* the book in which her discussion appears, is that as a genre emerging from 'white,

Western privilege' (p. 197) the essay is, paradoxically, a highly suitable means of radical resistance. This suitability resides in the fact that

> The essay is personal. The author matters intensely. When that author is a Black woman, the voice that comes through is one of radical import, for it is a voice that has been traditionally obliterated in Western thought and literature. The essay makes visible the patterns of an individual's thoughts... Much of the energy of the essay comes not from observation and confirmation of what is, but from reconsideration and resistance. (Mittlefehldt 1993, p. 198)

The essence of Mittlefehldt's argument rests on the attributes of the essay form, and in particular on the essay as a vehicle for the expression and contemplation of personal experience. In writing about this experience, and in claiming authority over it, the essay text ultimately gives an authoritative voice to those who have traditionally been silenced.

These arguments are important to this project because they show alternatives; they move the essay beyond its traditional ground, and in this sense point to opportunities beyond the 'top paddock' (Carter 2001, p.10). Perhaps then, the issue is less about aesthetics and ethics notable in the work of varied essayists, but rather in what contexts particular essays are made more (or less) available to a broader reading public.

The social nature of the essay: power, ideology and discourse communities

Thus far in this chapter, the contemporary Australian essay has been considered in a national, cultural and ideological context. We have seen that the ideological possibilities of the essay text are simultaneously profound and problematic. We know that the result of the reading act is primarily dependent on the reader, as an individual, and the context of the reading. However, the text remains an important part of the equation. Indeed, like the reader, the text is socially and culturally positioned; it is a marker of the time and place in which it is produced and read. Similarly, 'older' works

read and consumed in contemporary times are markers of concepts and ideals that remain important to the lives of people/readers.

As the following examination of Anderson (1991) and Fairclough (1995) shows, and as has been suggested above, the act of producing and consuming text is inherently social. While the reader approaches the text as a socially positioned individual, so too the text can be seen as an artefact that acts as a measure of a community's culture and its members' 'achievements'. Of particular interest to this project then, is how these communities might be revealed, what influence particular communities might have on and within the texts analysed, and subsequently what this might further reveal about the status of the contemporary Australian essay as a 'social' text.

The social nature of texts as examined by Anderson (1991) in his work on discourse communities and literary nonfiction, is particularly useful to this project. Anderson (1991) conceives a discourse community as one in which the 'interaction between language and experience' (p. 226) can be seen initially as a macrocosm of larger 'natural language speech communit[ies]' within which

> there is a virtually endless array of smaller, specialized microcosms comprising of groups of persons sharing particular values, interests, knowledge, dialects, expertise, occupations, geographical locations, personal histories, and so on... Members of such groups are drawn together through rhetorical processes that Kenneth Burke... calls "identification" and "consubstantiality"... These processes urge each individual to see and understand herself, through language and other symbolics, in relation to others. In response to this fundamental human urge, group members gather, talk, and act together, upon one another, and upon others to achieve a state of cooperation. (p. 226)

If we consider the essay text as one site in which members of a group gather to 'talk' and 'act' – together and upon others – we can see the ways in which the essay constitutes a social text, that is, one which is a product both of and for one or any number of communities. The essay text has a basis in the communities it seeks to represent and examine, but is not limited to these communities – its potential reach is much broader, even unknown.

Returning to the communities more immediately identifiable within the text, Anderson (1991) posits that,

> the process of negotiating individual knowledge with that of the community... is the most important and persistent tension within any discourse community and is precisely the process by which knowledge is enlarged and change brought about over time. (p. 228)

This strikes at the heart of the theories of the essay examined previously, and can be seen as validating Lukács' and Adorno's premise that the essay has the capacity to (and in their utopian view of the form, *should*) challenge the existing state or condition of things by how the essay text presents and creates knowledge. This presentation values self-reflection and the examination and narration of personal experience devoid of 'the nobility of the universal'.

Anderson's conception of literary nonfiction,[6] while sharing similarities with Lukács' and Adorno's vision of the essay form (in terms of negotiating individual and community knowledges), is less dogmatic than their philosophical positions on the essay. Anderson contemplates what constitutes a text within this genre. He suggests that there is less of a thesis that literary nonfiction has the potential to redeem the failings of other textual forms, and rather more of a concern with how knowledges are revealed and examined, as they relate to particular discourse communities, within and through the genre of literary nonfiction/the essay.

Anderson observes that there are many similarities to be drawn between literary nonfiction and the 'energies' of 'human discourse communities'. Within the constituents of both

> the role any individual plays in the discourse of a given group is shaped not by a single factor (the normal discourse of a group) or by a single process... but by a complicated and highly individual set of experiences with this and other communities, by expectations and assumptions arising from those experiences,

[6] As discussed in Chapter 1 the terms 'creative nonfiction' and 'literary nonfiction' denote the same understanding of genre. Although creative nonfiction has been used previously, literary nonfiction will be used here in keeping with Anderson's discussion, for the purposes of clarity. Further to this, unless otherwise stated, the use of literary nonfiction is deemed to also encompass the essay. Thus for the purposes of this discussion literary nonfiction can be read as the essay and the two terms, in this section, will be used interchangeably.

and most of all, by the degree to which the individual is conscious of his or her stance toward the community. (1991, p. 228)

The parallels between the structure and function of discourse communities more broadly, and literary nonfiction specifically, are set out in the diagram below. This diagram aims to demonstrate the ways in which the complex social relationships between individuals and communities and literary nonfiction texts are in a continual process of acting and being acted upon.

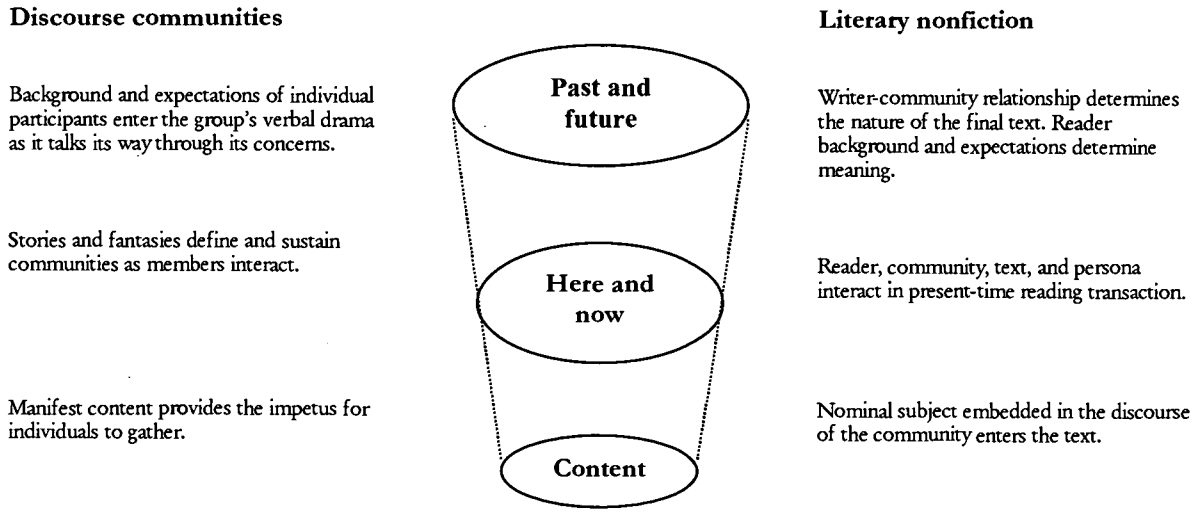


Figure 4 Parallels between discourse communities and literary nonfiction in Anderson (1991), p. 229.

Working from the bottom up, Anderson suggests that 'manifest content' in discourse communities is made up of the particular subjects that bring people together. These subjects may be wide-ranging – particular interests, occupations, religious beliefs and many more. In literary nonfiction, the 'nominal subject' is not dissimilar to 'manifest content' within a discourse community in that it is the subject, or central focus, of the text. Discourse communities are thus sustained, suggests Anderson, through the 'creating and maintaining' of those stories and 'fantasies' at their centre.[7] For literary nonfiction, the 'here and now' is realised in the interaction between reader, text, community and persona at the time of any one reading act. The conception of persona is an important one, because for Anderson, it is through the writerly persona

[7] For Anderson (reading from Bales, R.F. 1970, *Personality and Interpersonal Behavior*, Holt, New York) the notion of fantasy encompasses 'anecdotes, explanations and observations shared by members of the group as they talk their way toward community' (p. 227).

that the reader views the discourse community 'surrounding' the nominal subject. At the same time, for discourse communities and literary nonfiction, the backgrounds of individuals and the negotiated relationships with other individuals and communities constitute the boundaries set and meanings made, within the community or text/reading act. These processes point to particular histories, or pasts, and potential futures, such as continued membership within a community, or accepting the rhetorical premises of a text.

It is worthwhile revisiting the issue of writerly persona, because as Anderson suggests, it is an integral part of the way in which communities are examined, revealed and interpreted within literary nonfiction texts. He (1991) writes:

> What the reader knows of a community, how she is likely to feel, and whether she is likely to act or not depend very much upon the attitude of the persona through whose language and perspective she experiences the text. Although the writer and persona are almost never identical, the relationship between writer and subject community and the nonfictive obligation of the text exert a significant influence upon the nature of the persona and its subsequent stance towards the community represented in the text. (p. 230)

What this highlights in regards to this project is that there are, in a sense, two issues of authorship to be dealt with in regard to the contemporary Australian essay: firstly, the writerly persona, the character of the author presented in the text, and the perspective which this character gives to the discourse community about which they write; and secondly, the institution of authorship of the essay in Australia – who is writing essays and who gets published – the author 'outside' of the text.

Revisiting the issue of persona, the relationship between reader, text, community and persona as envisaged by Anderson (1991) is presented in the following diagram:

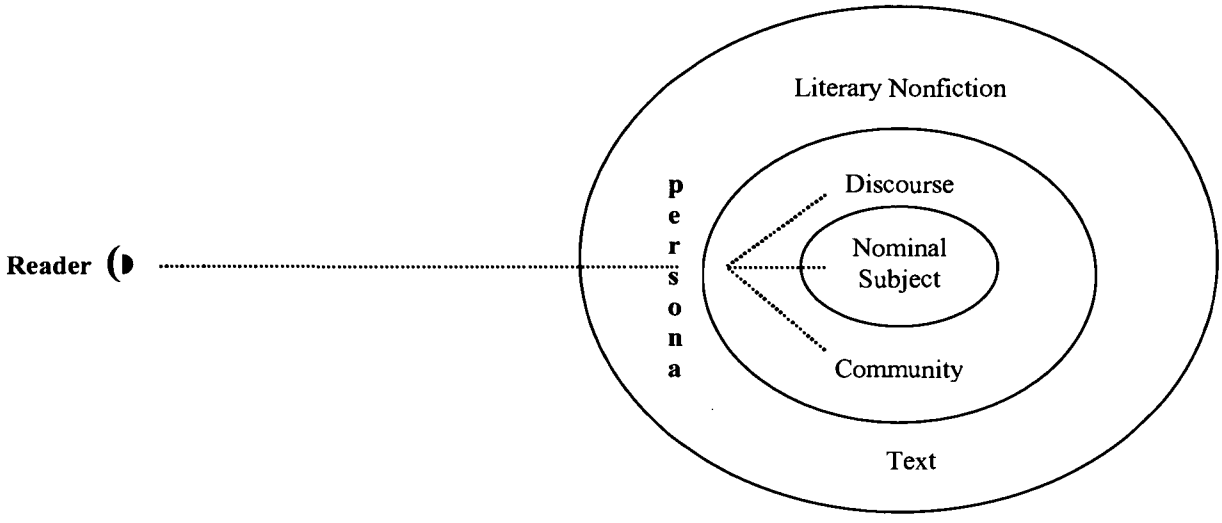


Figure 5 Nominal subject and discourse community are viewed through the literary nonfiction text and its persona, in Anderson (1991), p. 231.

The reader's view of the literary nonfiction text – a text comprised usually of a nominal subject (a person, a conversation, a thought, a holiday, for example) at the centre, surrounded by a discourse community – is largely mediated by the persona, which is in turn read by means of the textual and linguistic choices made by the author; hence the positioning of persona within the bounds of the literary nonfiction text. Importantly, while the nominal subject resides at the centre of the text, Anderson (1991) claims that 'it is the community surrounding the subject and the writer's representation of that community that comprise the main event and the primary interest for both reader and writer' (p. 30). That is, it is how the nominal subject is positioned and dealt with in relation to its host discourse community that gives interest to the narrative of literary nonfiction.

As has been outlined previously in this chapter, readers and writers bring histories and experiences within many discourse communities to the texts with which they are involved. Thus, while a single community might inform the 'main event' of a literary nonfiction text, there is never just one community at play.

This is a view shared and extended upon by Fairclough (1995) who views any

> instance of discursive practice... as simultaneously (i) a language text, spoken or written, (ii) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), (iii) sociocultural practice. Furthermore, a piece of discourse is embedded within sociocultural practice at a number of levels; in the immediate situation, in the wider institution or organization, and at the societal level. (p. 97)

Despite its different emphases, Fairclough's model of discourse analysis shares similarities with the kind of discussion taking place here. Anderson's theorising of discourse communities and literary nonfiction is certainly congruent with Fairclough's points (i) to (iii), in that we can see quite clearly in broad, and more specific genre based terms, the ways in which the production and interpretation of texts are inherently linked to social practice. Whilst the notion of discourse communities, in Anderson's terms, as the interaction between language and experience, encompasses a language text and discourse practice, it is these kinds of communities which constitute the 'wider institutions', 'organizations' and societies of sociocultural practice that now require further examination.

To analyse the role of one aspect of sociocultural practice in the conception of discourse, Fairclough (1995) examines part of a recorded conversation between a doctor and a patient who is an alcoholic.[8] For Fairclough, the production of discourse, in the example of this doctor/patient conversation, can be located within sociocultural practices at the organisational, institutional and societal level. That is, the doctor belongs to the institution of medicine; to a number of particular groups within that institution, in this case a group of doctors sympathetic with 'alternative' medicine; and to a society within which the move towards a 'conversationalization' of institutional discourse has enabled the doctor to enter into a doctor/patient conversation with a more 'alternative' configuration. Fairclough's argument and analysis is relevant here because they point to ways in which social practices influence

[8] The doctor/patient conversation is highlighted here to show in rather brief and simplified terms the constituents of discourse and their interrelationship with which Fairclough is concerned. For further details of this particular analysis see Fairclough (1995), pp. 98-102.

the structure, expectations, understanding and actuality of particular discursive events. Fairclough (1995) states:

> The link between sociocultural practice and text is mediated by discourse practice; how a text is produced or interpreted, in the sense of what discursive practices and conventions are drawn from what order(s) of discourse and how they are articulated together, depends upon the nature of the sociocultural practice which the discourse is part of... ; the nature of the discourse practice of text production shapes the text, and leaves 'traces' in surface features of the text; and the nature of the discourse practice of text interpretation determines how the surface features of a text will be interpreted. (p. 97)

This is demonstrated in the diagram below:

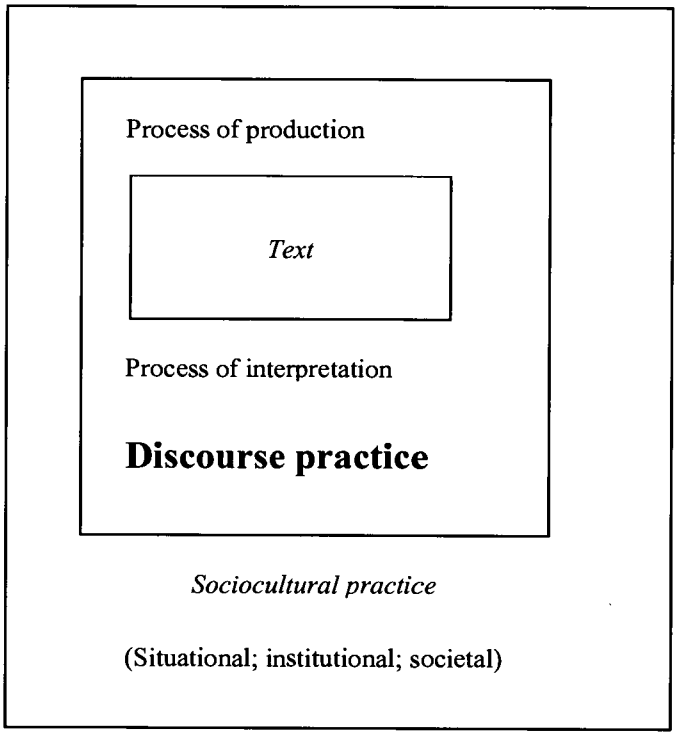


Figure 6 Dimensions of discourse, in Fairclough (1995), p. 98.

In considering Anderson's conception of the interactions between discourse communities (the author's, the reader's, and those within which the 'main event' of the text takes place (a community to which the author or reader may or may not belong) and literary nonfiction as a tool for examining essay texts, these apparent

communities will help determine, to some extent, the present location of the contemporary Australian essay. Further to this, as the discussion of Fairclough's work on discourse analysis shows, the sociocultural practices inherently linked to individual texts or discursive events are a fundamental part of the text, its production and consumption/interpretation, and therefore, must necessarily be considered in the analysis undertaken here. Thus, in mapping the contemporary Australian essay, this project is concerned with the communities represented within Australian essays: how they are represented, who is representing them, and the influence and role of sociocultural practices affecting the texts, predominantly the roles of editors, publishers, universities, and the Australian 'literary' community. As Fairclough (1995) asserts:

> This discussion points to the necessary interdependence of 'micro' analyses of specific discourse samples and more 'macro' analysis of longer term tendencies affecting orders of discourse... ' (pp. 101-102).

In Fairclough's view, the representation of discourse communities, as we have seen in the examination of both his and Anderson's work, and the 'sociocultural', are always inherently linked to notions of ideology and power. In this regard, Fairclough's conception of ideology is related to 'effects', that is, 'texts are seen as ideological in so far as they affect (sustain, undermine) power relations' (Fairclough 1995, p. 25). Within any discursive event, Fairclough suggests that ideology can be as seen both affecting the 'structure' of 'orders of discourse', and effected in the sense that 'ideologies are generated and transformed in actual discursive events' (p. 25). Thus for Fairclough, ideology is located within both structures and events.

We see that Anderson's and Fairclough's theories of discourse communities (and in the case of Anderson, literary nonfiction *and* discourse communities) provide a theoretical understanding for the issues associated with the essay in Australia as outlined by Davis and Carter.

This project is concerned with the discourse communities available within exemplars of *The Best Australian Essays*, as the close analysis in the following chapter shows, but

also the discourse communities for whom the essay is the 'rhetorical process', as Anderson notes, which brings individuals together. As a performative genre (Carter's term) the essay makes particular communities available to readers through the gaze of the writer's persona. Yet the essay as a textual form is also given a great deal of attention – by scholars, readers and notably, by essayists themselves. There is then an important discourse community identifiable with the essay itself. Interestingly, the struggles and achievements within this community have ostensibly become as important to the essay as those individual texts that denote the genre.

As such, this community, as an 'interaction between language and experience' (Anderson 1991, p. 226) is sustained, as Anderson suggests, and is in fact complicit in 'creating and maintaining' the stories and 'fantasies' at its centre. Indeed, this project itself is one such story or fantasy. Other examples of such stories/fantasies are seen in the written history of the essay, and similarly, its celebrated utopian potential. Scholars, essayists, reviewers, editors, publishers and readers are implicated as members of this group 'as they talk their way towards community' (Anderson 1991, p. 227). While Carter (2001) frames some of this 'talk' in somewhat different terms, as the 'mustering [of] dispersed cultural capital into the top paddock' (p. 10), what is this 'talk' reveals is the inherently social nature of the essay – a textual form inextricably tied to issues of ideology and power.

The relevance of the work of this project to the essay in Australia can then be seen in Fairclough's (1995) argument that critical discourse analysis is able to 'systematize awareness and critique of ideology' (p. 82) and from this critique 'arise possibilities of empowerment and change' (p. 83). Awareness, as conceived by Fairclough, can only be achieved with the recognition that

> Ideology works, as Althusser reminds us, by disguising its ideological nature. It becomes naturalized, automatized – 'common sense' in Gramsci's terms. Subjects are ideologically positioned as independent of ideological determination. Yet subjects are also contradictorily positioned, and when contradictory positions overlap they provide a basis for awareness and reflexivity, just as they lead to problematization and change. (1995, p. 82)

While we can see that the essay in Australia is bound in issues of power and ideology, it is necessary now to turn to the historicity of the essay as a means for further understanding the positions of the various stakeholders on the nature and form of the genre in this country.

Part II

The contemporary Australian essay in context

Earlier in this chapter, in reference to Davis's disdain with the continued reference, in contemporary times, to the essay's historical association with European bourgeois culture and Montaigne, we revisited Kauffmann's (1981) argument that to ignore the history of the essay is to reify it. History, he reminds us, shows that the essay is far from a concrete genre. It is, rather, fluid and evolving, yet inextricably linked to the achievements and struggles of the past.

It is timely to now turn to Australia's own history of and with the essay. As Davis's and Carter's examinations show, there are particular tensions associated with the contemporary essay – tensions that relate specifically to the location, appropriation and gatekeepers of the essay, and that are deeply embedded within Australia's literary and publishing history.

Interestingly, despite the highly visible and celebrated status of the contemporary Australian essay, and the robust debates that have ensued; despite the sustained story of Montaigne and his *Essais*, and those of Europe's "great" essayists; Australia's own documented history of the essay, though interesting and important, is scant. Given that there is little by way of a documented history of the Australian essay, it is important to note that the history of the essay in Australia presented here is not definitive or comprehensive. It is rather a composite of histories. The Australian essay sits within a framework of the rise and development of Australian publishing, literary

magazines and notions of the Australian literary canon. Certainly, a detailed history of the Australian essay and its practitioners would be an interesting and valuable endeavour, however, it is one beyond the scope of this project – it is a project in itself.

Positioning the Australian essay

Salusinszky (1997) suggests that there are only a small number of publications that track the history of the essay in Australia.[9] The first of these, *Essays: imaginative and critical*, was published in 1933, edited by Mackaness and Holmes; followed by *Australian Essays*, published in 1935, with selections by Cowling and Maurice; *The Australian Essay*, in 1968, compiled by Rodd; *Forum: contemporary Australian essays*, in 1972, edited by Elder;[10] and finally *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays* in 1997, edited by Salusinszky. Other than Salusinszky's more recent anthology, these earlier collections of Australian essays are now out of print and are difficult to locate. Despite their relative obscurity, however, together these texts point to an emerging essay culture in the history of Australian literature.

Cowling and Maurice, in their introduction to *Australian Essays*, link their understanding, and indeed admiration, of the essay genre to the pioneering work of Montaigne in particular, but also Francis Bacon, Ben Johnson and the early English essayists.[11] The issues of style and grace, the expression of a personal viewpoint, and the essence of the essay as an attempt or *trial* (the term used by Lopate 1999,) to discover the 'value in human life' (1935, p. vii), are dominant in Cowling and Maurice's discussion of the essay form. However, the location of the essay is also important. For Cowling and Maurice, 'the essay is journalism; but at its best it is excellent journalism' (1935, p. viii). This certainly links strongly with our

[9] This is an important point, for there have been many essay collections published prior to the launch of *The Best Australian Essays in 1998*. However, the collections examined here are concerned wholly with the essay genre as it is/has been practised in Australia. In these publications there is value for this project because the editors are engaged with the essay genre as a writing and cultural practice. As such, Australian essayists and their work are identified and showcased in relation to the genre. The history presented in the following pages does not seek to engage with all essay texts published in Australia, but rather, with those texts demonstrably concerned with a national practice and appropriation of the essay.

[10] In this anthology there is no introduction or forward in which the essay genre in Australia is considered or discussed by the editor.

[11] Cowling and Maurice cite Addison and Steele, Goldsmith, Dr Johnson, Lamb and Macaulay (p. vii).

understanding of the essay genre as it was developed in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it is also an important distinction in relation to the appearance of the essay in Australia. As Cowling and Maurice (1935) state

> The Australian essay is the product of that most potent force in the cultural development of Australia, the newspaper. The magazine and review have not flourished here... The story and the newspaper have been preferred to the novel and the review. Consequently, most of our essays have seen the light in columns of newspapers, especially in the Saturday journals, rather than in more ambitious periodicals. (p. ix)

Their remarks must be read in a historical context: the Australian literary scene, and the Australian literary magazine, had not yet begun to 'flourish' in 1935. Prior to the establishment of the *Bulletin* in 1880, Webby (1981) argues that Australian newspapers and magazines held the 'essay and sketch' as 'the dominant prose form[s]' (p. 6). He notes that the *Australasian* ran a regular feature, 'The Essayist', which 'contained old-style moralistic pieces as well as essays in the more modern whimsical style' (p. 6). At this time travel literature, sporting literature and tales of urban life were also popular, and after 1850, Webby suggests, literary journalism (defined in practice as reviews and comments on literature) began to appear. The *Melbourne Punch* and the *Australian Journal* were the most successful periodicals prior to the publication of the *Bulletin*, and they helped to set the framework for the *Bulletin,* and indeed paved the way for, amongst other things, an Australian literary tradition that included the essay form (Webby 1981). Despite these earlier periodicals, arguably the *Bulletin* is most significantly associated with the development of an Australian literary dialogue, and subsequently the establishment of an Australian literary tradition. Most notably, in this regard, was the inclusion of the 'Red Page', the *Bulletin's* literary supplement.

Kylie Tennant, in writing the introduction to L.C. Rodd's *The Australian Essay*, shares the views of Cowling and Maurice, three decades earlier. Like the former, Tennant (1968) also sees the foundation of the essay form as having come from Montaigne. And in the Australian context, she sees the essay as inherently linked to journalism: 'Journalism, whereby a man earned his living, was approved, but 'Literature' could demand no pampering' (p. 3). Thus, for Tennant, the Australian essay is closely linked

to the style of 'Steele, Johnson, Lamb and Hazlitt' (p. 2) – familiar, discursive, morally informing, reasonably short, subdued and unpretentious.

In his attempt to define the essay, Salusinszky (1997) invokes a sense of what the essayist and essay form is, as much by its supposed qualities, as by what it is not:

> Certainly the essayist is closer to the lyric poet than to the writer of fiction, because deep in the essay there is the convention that the essayist is overheard thinking aloud, rather than heard directly. Instead of telling us what she thinks we ought to know, the essayist lets us listen in as she finds out what it is she knows. Hence the editorial is never an essay; nor is the republican (or monarchist) harangue, that major environmental hazard of our time. (pp. 2-3)

Certainly, the underlying themes of these collections appear to have much in common: a sense of the essay as a personal exploration, strongly linked to Montaigne and the later English essayists, historically and most significantly found in our newspapers.

Developing an Australian literary dialogue

As the value of Australia's own national history and stories became apparent, most notably in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so too issues of colonialism and institutionalisation arose within the literary and intellectual community. As such, the development of the Australian essay can be seen to have occurred largely in conjunction with the development and contestation of an Australian literary dialogue and notions of an Australian 'canon'. The Australian literary dialogue continues today, although arguably the theoretical and ideological positions have shifted somewhat. Regardless, notions of nation, representation, the academy, commercial media, and the Australian reading public (as consumers) still continue to give rise to lively debate.

The beginning of the Australian literary dialogue is most recognisable, in terms of influence and action, in the nationalist agenda of the early to mid twentieth century.

The 'nationalist project', according to Carter (2000), is linked to notions of the 'nationalist intellectual... most prominently seen in the work of Vance and Nettie Palmer' who were writing in the 1930s (p. 266). Carter (2000) further states that in developing and arguing for an Australian national identity, as distinct from a British one, the Palmers 'worked the image of Australia's 1890s into a powerful myth of origins in which "conscious literature" and folk culture were fused with the ideal image of an organic national culture' (p 267). In this sense the nationalist project can be seen as a declaration of a distinct Australian culture. The project, then, set out to establish a recognisable canon (and therefore, critique) of Australian specificity.[12] How the Australian canon was to be conceived and critiqued was, however, a point of deep contention. On this issue Carter (2000) notes that

> It is misleading to see an unbroken nationalist mainstream dominating Australian criticism. Nationalism was crossed by a mix of traditional, vitalist, bohemian and communist tendencies that made up the literary conversation. The more "intellectual" forms of nationalism were also internationalist, taking their bearings from European and American models. (p. 268)

Carter argues that despite the apparent plurality of the nationalist project, it was inevitably to become more 'politicised' and 'intellectualised', and more cohesive, in the face of domestic and international developments, particularly fascism, communism, the Depression, the Spanish Civil War, and World War II. It was during the early twentieth century that, within the nationalist project, was seen the necessary

> engagement with new political and artistic ideas together, and in this crossover of aesthetic and political discourses the literary intellectual was called into being (Carter 2000, p. 269).

Literary periodicals: the Australian canon and the Australian essay

At the same time as the nationalists were championing the Australian literary cause, and the public intellectual was 'called into being', two publications which would act as forums for this 'new' dialogue were first published – *Southerly* in September 1939 and

12 The Palmers and associated nationalists of the 1930s were not the first to set about establishing an Australian literary canon. Pierce (2001) points to earlier examples in the publications of *The Development of Australian Literature* in 1898, and *The Cultivation of Literature in Australia* in 1902 (p. 360).

Meanjin soon after in December 1940. According to Lee (1981), *Southerly* came about as a result of colonial discontent amongst members of the English Association: Sydney Branch (previously known as The Australian English Association). The title *Southerly*, represented, Lee suggests, the geographical location of the magazine's origins, a distinction between Sydney's southern location and that of the northern, British 'parent body', and yet 'southerly' suggested a continued dependence on England and English literature. Lee (1981) notes that the English Association: Sydney Branch believed that 'Australian literature would not emerge in isolation but would be nourished by and take its standards from its immediate cultural progenitor, classical English literature' (p. 163). The title *Southerly* was also adopted because

> The 'southerly buster' is Sydney's most newsworthy weather item: during heat waves its progress is chartered anxiously because of the fresh, cool, bracing relief it brings; often, too, it is a destructive force unroofing suburban homes, disrupting services, destroying pleasure craft. So there was the further intimation that the journal might provide a breath of fresh air for an enervated local literary establishment, at risk perhaps of shaking things up a bit on occasion (Lee 1981, p. 163).

In 1955 the sub-title 'A Review of Australian Literature', was added to the journal, and remains to this day.

Meanjin began its life in Brisbane as what Strahan and Wallace-Crabbe (1981) describe as a 'communion wafer of literature', made up of eight poems and a 'concern for home-grown poetry'. However within a period of approximately twelve months, *Meanjin* had crossed over and become a magazine of 'cultural politics'. *Meanjin* became a quarterly publication in 1943 and by this time had begun to distinguish itself from 'mere journalism'; it was, Carter (2000) notes, aimed at 'literary intellectuals' and thus sought to provide its readership with

> Cultural commentary, philosophy, literary criticism, history and anthropology... together [with]... verse and fiction, in what seemed like a shared public sphere of liberal values... (p. 270)

Although the magazine's scope appeared to be quite broad, Carter (2000) argues that 'literature remained at the centre of *Meanjin's* interests as the medium through which

cultural values were created and sustained' (p. 270). This representation was to alter slightly in 1945 when *Meanjin* and its editors moved to Melbourne, where its 'creative élan was to be combined with weightier academic material' (p. 175) under the influence of, and financial security offered by, the University of Melbourne.

For Carter (2000), both *Southerly* and *Meanjin* allowed a publication space for the Australian 'formal critical essay'. *Meanjin* in particular contributed to a 'new confidence in talk about Australian literature' (p. 270). The middle of the twentieth century was a time, Carter suggests, in which a 'newly-available density' in Australian literature was emphasised also by emerging and substantial bodies of work on Australian history.[13] The timely parallels between Australia's literature and history indicate for Carter (2000) that

> Australia's unique historical experiences had given rise to distinctively Australian attitudes, democratic, nationalist and popular, manifested at first unconsciously in ballads and folk song and then consciously in the literature of the 1890s. (p. 271)

Southerly and *Meanjin*, as publications made up of both academic and amateur literary criticism, also reflect the sometimes-tenuous relationship between the universities and literature in Australia. During the 1950s, a time when Carter (2000) suggests that the amateur critic resembled the 'public intellectual' more closely than the university academic did (p. 271), Australian universities began to take an interest in the Australian literary canon.

Australian literary magazines and the essay

The location of the essay in Australia, in terms of where essays get published, provides some insight into the manifestation of the genre in this country, and also who achieves status as our most recognised essayist/s. As the introductions to all three Australian essay anthologies referenced earlier suggest, Australian essays are linked most recognisably to newspapers and journalism. This is true particularly in the

[13] Carter cites W.K. Hancock's (1964) *Australia* and the work of Brian Fitzpatrick's (1956) publications such as *The Australian Commonwealth*.

earlier half of the twentieth century, but after the 1940s, Australia's literary magazine production has also greatly influenced the domestic essay. In a substantial number of these magazines, the essay has become a more visible genre (notable in their contents pages), particularly over the last decade.

Since the mid-1980s, and more evidently since the 1990s, the essay (with apparent varying degrees of significance and varying interpretations of what the term 'essay' represents) has held a definite place in Australia's literary and cultural magazines. The essay can be found within *Southerly* and *Meanjin*, and the later entries into the market – *Overland*, *Quadrant*, *Eureka Street*, and the *Australian Book Review (ABR)*. More recent additions to this list include the *Quarterly Essay* (2001), the *Griffith Review* (2003), and *The Monthly* (2005). In all, the essay has become increasingly visible. Australia's literary and cultural magazines, then, are of great interest to this project, both in presenting the essay genre to their respective readerships, and also as a source from which *The Best Australian Essays* are selected.

On the face of it, Australia's literary and cultural magazines appear to share a number of common features: all ostensibly claim to be literary and cultural journals containing intelligent, well written reviews/essays/fiction/poetry/artwork and so on as part of the ongoing debate centred on ideas and politics in this country. The distinction between the individual magazines is most evident in their respective ideological positions and their dominating aims and objectives. Perhaps the most obvious example here is the *ABR*, which is focussed primarily on recognising and reviewing new Australian books.

The other magazines can be categorised by the particular versions of Australian culture which they seek to represent. *Overland*, for example, claims to be 'the most radical of Australia's long-standing literary/cultural magazines' (2005, *Overland*), this being evident in its tradition of 'publishing dissenting articles with a political and cultural focus'. *Overland* was initially sponsored by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), and incorporated the *Realist Writer* when publishing first began in 1954. The link with the CPA was broken in 1958 due to conflicts in editorial and ideological

agendas (AustLit[14]). In declaring its Furphean motto, 'Temper democratic; Bias Australian', *Overland* has traditionally aimed for a more general, non-specialist, non-academic readership, although, according to AustLit, there has been some recent criticism that *Overland* has, in publishing more 'unsuitable' academic articles, lost sight of its original aims and purpose. Interestingly, this is a position and claim that has also been made about *Meanjin*, particularly in the early 1990s.[15]

In contrast, *Quadrant,* which claims to be an 'intellectual journal of ideas, literature, poetry and historical and political debate' argues on its web site that, while declarations that the journal is 'conservative, neo-conservative and rightwing' are not necessarily true, it does take a dim view of 'Leftism' and its 'smelly little orthodoxies'. Further, *Quadrant* declares itself to be open-minded on issues of philosophy and religion, 'unlike most intellectual journals'. These attacks are ostensibly levelled at the more 'leftist' journals, *Overland* and *Meanjin*, and Jesuit Publications' *Eureka Street.*

Eureka Street asserts that it is a 'magazine of public affairs, the arts and theology' in which political analysis, arts reviews, and religious commentary are 'renowned for [their]... eloquence, clarity and humour' (2005, *Eureka Street*). *Eureka Street* publishes articles, reviews, essays, poetry, and short fiction and, prior to the publication of *The Monthly,* was second only to *Meanjin* as one of the major magazine from which essays in *The Best Australian Essays* were sourced.

Another magazine well represented as a source for *The Best Australian Essays*, is *ABR,* which began publishing in 1961, and ceased briefly between 1973 and 1978. Although established initially to '"notice" and review every new Australian book', *ABR* has 'always published features on various topics' (AustLit). Under the editorship of Helen Daniels during the 1990s, *ABR* also became concerned with public forums, and writing and reviewing competitions; and under the editorship of Peter Rose (since

[14] According to its www site AustLit is 'a non-profit collaboration between twelve Australian Universities and the National Library of Australia providing authoritative information on hundreds of thousands of creative and critical Australian literature works relating to more than 100,000 Australian authors and literary organisations. Its coverage spans 1780 to the present day.'

[15] Perhaps this can be linked with the 'arrival' (Carter's term, 2000) in the 1980s and the ensuing discussions, gaining wider public recognition in the 1990s, of literary and cultural theory.

2001), the magazine published both commissioned poetry and fiction. What is particularly interesting for this project, is the inclusion in *ABR* from 1989 onwards, of a sponsored essay. The essay was initially sponsored by Telecom (AustLit), and then the National Library, under the series title 'National Library Australian Voices Essay', published between 1993-1999. Since June 1999 La Trobe University has sponsored *ABR's* feature essay, entitled rather obviously 'The La Trobe University Essay'. In 2006 *ABR* established an annual essay competition, 'The Calibre Prize', to 'reward all this essayistic zeal [of the past decade in Australia] and to encourage people to write new essays' (*ABR* 2006, p.1).

While essays from Australia's literary magazines have traditionally been a significant source of *The Best Australian Essays*, the individual magazines' categorisation and recognition of the genre are varied. This can be seen most notably in the contents pages under which individual works are listed – for example, articles, reviews, essays, fiction and poetry. In *Meanjin*, the literary magazine to feature significantly in *The Best Australian Essays* collections, a listing for the essay genre appears first in 1985, and relatively consistently since that time. In *Meanjin* the genre of essay has appeared paired up with reviews and interviews, has been listed separately, and more recently, 'essay' and 'memoir' have been co-listed in the contents. The categories of 'review essay' and 'photo essay' have also been included in *Meanjin* at various times. An inspection of both *Overland's* and *Quadrant's* contents pages show 'personal essay' listed once in 2004 and 'editorial essay' listed twice in 1994, respectively. It would appear that for these two magazines, these are the only specific claims for the essay genre within their publications. Prior to this time, *Southerly* lists 'essays' and 'interviews' together in the contents from 1989 onwards, becoming simply 'essays' in 1993.

New arrivals to the Australian literary and cultural magazine scene claim a prominent space for the essay genre. The *Griffith Review* dedicates a large portion of its publication space to the essay, alongside closely related genres such as memoir, reportage and reviews. *The Monthly* has a section entitled 'The Monthly Essays'; and the *Quarterly Essay* is exactly that, an 'essay' of approximately 20 000 words published

quarterly, also containing a smaller section at the back for responses to the main 'essay'.

Despite the small circulation numbers for Australia's literary and cultural magazines,[16] the essay genre has become increasingly visible over the past fifteen years in such publications. The manifestation of the essay in these magazines is less straightforward, however. As one would expect of a genre which seems to consistently defy categorisation, the essays in Australian literary and cultural magazines range from a traditional Montaignean style, through to what Heilker (1996) describes as a thesis/report form – the latter of which, some have argued, is not in fact an essay at all.

Australian essayists: the history and tensions of the academic/amateur dichotomy

There is a clear link between the essay in Australia and journalism, evident particularly in the work of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century essayists. Examples of essayists who were also journalists include Edmund Finn, who wrote for the Melbourne *Morning Herald*; Ernest Scott, who wrote for *The Argus*; Daniel Deniehy, who wrote for the *Southern Cross*; Marcus Clarke, who wrote for the Melbourne *Argus*, *The Argus*, *The Australasian*, and the *Daily Telegraph*; and C.E.W. Bean, who wrote for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. While many Australian essayists have at one time or another been published in both Australian and overseas newspapers, their credentials are not necessarily limited to journalism. Historically, Australian essayists have held professions *other* than that of simply, or only, essayist, including writers (in the broader sense), academics, scientists, ministers of religion, footballers, lawyers, and teachers. There are of course many other professions which one might include in this

[16] Crawford (2005) reports that the circulation figures for the *Quarterly Essay* are at 12 000, 7500-8000 for *Quadrant*, and 2500 for *Overland*.

list, but certainly journalists, academics and writers – those with a penchant for the written word, it would seem – make up the majority.[17]

Both Tennant and Salusinszky identify Walter Murdoch as one of Australia's finest essayists, and with the advantage of time, Salusinszky also includes here Clive James. Certainly, Clive James and his essays are well known to most Australian readers today, despite his expatriate status. On the other hand, Murdoch, as Salusinszky rightly points out, is virtually unknown to contemporary readers, despite being an 'immensely popular' essayist of 'best-sellers' (p. 2) in the 1930s and 40s. Part of his disappearance in recent times is perhaps attributable, Salusinszky suggests, to the 'strong whiff of the Edwardian British world into which he was born and educated', a 'whiff', he posits, that may be too overbearing 'for contemporary readers' (p. 2).

Despite the simple pleasure Murdoch's essays seem to endow, there is most certainly an outdated nuance to his prose:

> Of this kind of profanity ['decorative' swearing] I declare myself heartily sick and tired. If its original purpose was, as I suppose, decoration, it has lost its pristine beauty, and has become merely ugly, barbaric, and disgusting: it is beginning to make us a byword among decent nations. (Murdoch cited in Salusinszky 1997, p. 96)

Murdoch was both essayist and academic. His skill as an essayist has received some recent and revitalized acclaim (see Salusinszky 2005, and in a more indirect way, Craven 2003), but his career was, as Dale (1993) points out, also clouded with negative criticism. Murdoch has been both praised and vilified by the communities in which he worked. Criticised as 'anti-Australian, imperialist, and a "mere populist"' (p. 6) Murdoch believed his academic career had been blighted by his journalistic pursuits[18] (Dale, 1993). Dale's examination suggests that, as one might expect of an

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[17] For a detailed list of Australian essayists and their personal/professional backgrounds from the mid-nineteenth century to 1935 see Cowling, G & Maurice, F 1935, *Australian Essays*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

[18] Murdoch wrote essays on literature and criticism for the *Argus* from 1899-1913 in a column entitled 'Books and Men'. Later columns with a more sociological bent included 'Life and Letters', 'Answers', and 'Afterthoughts' (published nationally) (Dale 1993). Murdoch ceased writing the column, 'Afterthoughts', when he was 93 (Dale), three years before his death in 1970.

essayist, Murdoch was a man of contradictions and changing opinions. Dale argues that much of the criticism aimed at Murdoch fails to consider his broad body of work, and indeed its contradictory and evolving nature, which Dale attributes in part to the complexities of institutionalisation and colonialism.

Murdoch brought to Australia the essay form, in the spirit of Montaigne and Lamb. This is certainly evident in his familiar approach, as Salusinszky (2005) points out

> You can get a sense of what the familiar essay was all about just by scanning Murdoch's titles: *On Growling; Tripe and Onions; On Sitting Still; On Rabbits; Morality, Etc; Our Aunts*. (p. 40)

The fact that Murdoch has not maintained the status as a national literary icon (although he does have a university named after him), in the same way as Montaigne or Lamb, or perhaps more fittingly, America's most popular essayist of that time, E.B. White, is a situation which Salusinszky finds attributable to the cultural landscape of Australian literature. Reflecting on this point, he suggests that

> Australia's greatest essayist wrote the bulk of his pieces during the only period in which the genre has found genuine favour here. The Australian familiar essay is wedged between two historical realities. On the one side is a threatened pioneer culture that desperately needs the consolations of story but does not have the leisure to indulge in the free play of the intellect. On the other is an embattled intelligentsia that has largely abandoned communication with the general reading public and has retreated instead into a self-reinforcing group think. (Salusinszky 2005, p. 40)

It is a contested claim that over recent years the essay and its close 'relatives' are not in genuine favour. Indeed Salusinszky's own anthology of essays is one in an ever-increasing list of publications confidently claiming the status of essay. Moreover, with regard to his closing remarks, the notion of a 'self-reinforcing group think' is what has prompted many in academe to turn to the essay genre as a way of undertaking scholarly work in a form different to traditional academic prose.[19] But this does point

[19] See for examples the discussions on creative nonfiction and academic writing in Root, R & Steinberg, M 2001, *The Fourth Genre: contemporary writers of/ on creative nonfiction*, 2nd edn, Longman, New York.

to a particular cultural landscape as suggested above, and there are, as examined earlier, a number of complex issues at stake.[20]

In regards to the contested status of the essay form, one might point to the more contemporary essayists whom Salusinszky incorporates in his 1997 anthology. This list includes Barry Oakley, David Malouf, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Pierre Ryckmans, Les Murray, Germaine Greer, Helen Garner, Kate Jennings, Kerryn Goldsworthy, Greg Manning, and Michael McGirr. Five of these essayists hold doctorates (considering Salusinszky's notion of an 'embattled intelligentsia', cited previously) and the others are, aside from their essay writing, well-known practitioners of literature (in one or more of its many guises). Many of the writers from the above list have published their own collections of essays: Germaine Greer (1986), Les Murray (1990), Barry Oakley (1993), Kate Jennings (1993), Pierre Ryckmans (under the pen-name Simon Leys) (1999), and Helen Garner (2001). But this is by no means a comprehensive list of Australian contemporary essayists; Eric Rolls (1984), Ruby Langford Ginibi (1992), Lily Brett (1997), Robert Manne (1998), Robert Dessaix (1998), Jackie Huggins (1998), Peter Goldsworthy (1998), Drusilla Modjeska (2002), and recently, Noel Pearson (2009), for example, have also published essay collections. Nor do the above additions take into consideration the healthy number of writers who publish essays relatively regularly in Australian newspapers and literary/cultural magazines, but do not have an anthology to their name. There is then an argument to be made that the Australian contemporary essay is not without a sound number of *creative*, and *intelligent*, practitioners, both amateur and professional.

Inside and outside the academy

For Docker (1984), the 'Great Dividing Range' between the amateurs and the professionals over the framework of the canon and its subsequent criticism plays out like a 'drama of conflict and contestation' (p. 83). This divide, he argues, was a split between amateur and professional, contextualist and formalist, nationalist and New

[20] See 'Revival and problematics of the contemporary Australian essay' at the beginning of this chapter.

Critics/Leavisites. Docker's (1984) work *In a Critical Condition* has received some negative criticism[21] for its assessment of New Criticism, and Barthes' work on authorship in particular; despite this, his discussion on the rise of professional literary criticism within the academy is useful.

Along with the universities' growing interest in the establishment of the Australian literary canon came the inevitable institutionalisation of Australian literary criticism. Essentially, the academy assumed the authority to decide which literary texts were to be included in the 'canon' and which were not, and also the way in which criticism was to be structured; this assumption was made on the basis that members of the academy were scholars, formally trained in English literature. In this way, the nationalist movement, and indeed others not belonging to the academy, namely literary journalists and creative writers, were considered as 'non-critics', as 'non-textually-trained' (Docker 1984, p. 86), and accordingly, they were not authorities on the subject or the discipline.

The existence of two distinct discourse communities, struggling for authority and influence over the Australian literary canon, is well documented. Lee (1998), like Docker, argues there is a culture of dissent amongst Australian literary critics – a divide between 'professional' and 'amateur'. What was at stake for the professional academics was the engagement of a 'specific critical practice' as a means of authorising the formation of a particular Australian canon, and thereby 'raising the tone of the national product and its local audience' (Lee 1998, pp. 187-88). The 'amateurs', in turn, argued against the pretentious 'jargon' of institutional discourse, and its narrow 'insular and dull' inclusions in, and criticism of, the Australian literary canon. Furthermore, Lee suggests, in his summary of Judith Wright's and Max Harris's arguments on this issue (both were 'amateur critics'), that there was a concern that

> the intellectualism that results from the shift of poetic production to the universities will see professional criticism and its theories interfere with the

[21] See for example Manning, Greg 1984, 'Conditioning Critics', *Meanjin*, 43.3, pp. 414-22; Brady, Veronica 1988, 'Critical Issues', *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, Laurie Hergenhan (ed), Penguin Books, Ringwood, Victoria, pp. 467-74.

> personal imagination and life experience ... essential to poetry... These professionals have elevated intellect and technique over idiom, language and sensibility to the detriment of Australian poetry (Lee 1998, pp. 191-92).

This is an argument that is also applicable to other literary forms.

The ideologies and debates surrounding Australian literature carried through into the 1970s and, as Carter (2000) asserts, this saw the publication of much critical commentary in magazines such as *Southerly*, *Meanjin* and later entries into the field – *Overland*, *Westerly* and *Australian Literary Studies*. It was in this spirit that the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) was formed, in 1977, representing, Carter (2000) states, 'both the culmination of the critical enterprise of the previous two decades and the stirring new developments beyond its orthodoxy' (p. 279). At this time, Carter suggests, there was a move from members within the academy, but outside of university English departments, towards a more ideologically based critique and politicisation of Australian history and culture. Specifically targeted were 'claims to universal truth or ideological disinterest which had sustained the academic institutionalisation of Australian literature' (Carter 2000, pp. 279-80). Such criticism of English departments can be seen in the work of Turner and Bird (2001 [1982]), who argued at the time that

> a significant body of opinion is still unwilling to concede that teachers of Australian studies and, particularly, of Australian Literature *need* a theory at all. Australian literature is, traditionally, taught in similar ways to English Literature; Australian literature courses continue to expose students to what are agreed to be the 'major' works in the 'tradition', without explicitly imposing a theoretical construct on either the works or the tradition. Indeed, to do so is seen as interrupting the reading of the work for its intrinsic quality, which is somehow self-evident. (p. 142)

Contemporary critics, book reviewers and academics

During (1987) argues, and it is a position that bears relevance today, that the book reviewer has supplanted the amateur critic, and considers the distinction between criticism and review to be a fundamentally important one. In simple terms, During

sees criticism as linked to the academy, and the review positioned outside it. He argues that *reviews* of books in the mainstream press habitually offer something akin to a 'consumer's guide to the cultural commodities (a term I do not intend as merely negative) turned out by the publishing industry'. (p. 303)

The distinction between criticism and review, During suggests, is in simple terms, a difference in intellectual rigour; he does concede, however, that the issue of audience is also at stake. Book reviewers have a much wider audience than that of 'critical academic writing [which] assumes a particular audience, one which is by now very institutionalised and extraordinarily well educated within narrow areas' (During 1987, p. 302).

During (1987), however, sees value in criticism and its links to the academy because it is ultimately both self-questioning (in the sense that contemporary theory can be seen as calling into question *everything*), and 'motivated by oppositional interests' (p. 308). The academy, therefore, can be seen to offer a form of protection from 'politicians and the electorate' who, ostensibly unlike him, are not 'educated into criticism' (p. 308). During (1987) asserts that

> Criticism defends literature as the dream of a public sphere, of common sense grounded on nature, and attacks those features of society – class arrogance and difference, coarseness, chaos, jargon... which threaten that dream... The history of modern literary criticism is the story of an unsuccessful struggle to maintain the image of cultural unity. (p. 309)

That criticism is able, in part through some degree of institutional protection (although arguably this has waned greatly in the last decade), to attack notions of universality and hegemony, whilst at the same time to celebrate the 'unsimple formation' of literature, is in many ways a valid claim, but one requiring further examination. Hassall (2001) points out that the 'strength' and indeed '(perceived) weakness' of literature is 'its reach outside the academy' (p. 92). During picks up on this issue when he considers that part of the problem, in the defence of literary criticism, lies in its apparent 'lack of immediate use-value [for the broader community]

or, even worse, from the difficulty of communicating critical writings to the media. There is no way a resistance to simplification is going to be simple' (p. 308).

It is timely to now return to the book review, for unlike literary criticism, it does not stake a claim for a particular discourse of the 'educated' *per se*. Rather, the book review is a more inclusive discursive formation. However, like its academic nemesis, with its apparent tendency to overdo the institutional discourse, the book review, Galligan (1998) states, has been accused in some instances of becoming nothing more than 'infotainment'. He argues that the contemporary status of book reviewing sees reviews of up to five novels compressed into a single newspaper column; 'reviewers [who] are unnecessarily vicious or applaud the mediocre'; and that the 'combative' approach in many newspaper reviews actually serves to 'mask a lack of interest in engaging in constructive literary debate' (p. 157). Of particular concern for Galligan is the propensity by which the review has been substituted for an interview with the author. What this in turn reveals is a situation which, Galligan (1998), citing McQueen, argues,

> produces "a form of public relations or unpaid advertising" segment... The author is basically allowed to sell the book... within this framework, "there is very much a watering down of critical standards and the amount of intelligence, time and effort that is brought to bear on the whole process" (p. 157)

For Turner (1998), that literature has over the past two decades found a place for itself within the academy, in theoretical terms, has resulted in a far more problematic representation of literature, and the discourses of literature, outside of the academy. Part of this problem, which relates to During's argument, is that such representation comes to the public sphere, from the academy, via the mass media; and relationships between the two are, in contemporary times, 'fragile'. This fragility lies, Turner (1998) argues, in 'the significant changes [that] have occurred in recent years which have had the cumulative effect of emphasising the gaps between literary critics, professional writers, journalists and the media in general' (p. 8). These gaps are largely attributable to the distance between academic literary discourse and the 'language of public

debate'. As a result, and in relation to issues that are important to this project, particularly as they relate to 'gatekeepers' and consumers, Turner (1998) posits that:

> The contest for cultural authority between the academy and the media is visible in the debates on 'theory' orchestrated in the opinion pages and higher education supplements by Helen Trinca, Jane Richardson and Luke Slattery; similarly, newspaper opinion pieces on the state of Australian writing do not come from the literary critical establishment but from Greg Sheridan, Gerard Henderson, Luke Slattery (again) and Ken Wark [who is actually an academic]... the formation and establishment of literary reputations... are now the concern of newspaper features and editorials, photo profiles in glossy magazines, lifestyle interviews in the press, on television [etc]... This trend has been visible for some time. Ten years ago when Peter Carey published *Oscar and Lucinda*, he received more space in *Elle* magazine than in the *Australian Book Review*. (p. 9)

For Turner, the visibility of the author in the promoting of literary works, is not, as Galligan has implied, necessarily a negative factor. The author interview, and indeed the author as celebrity, does not necessarily indicate a 'systemic problem' or a 'trivialisation' of literary discussion.[22] However, he is forced to concede that interest in writers because of a manufactured personality/celebrity status can certainly have the effect of focussing more attention on the personality of the author than on the expression of his/her thoughts and talents in the literary form.

The discussion of literary 'theory' in the mass media is not without its problems. This can be seen in Turner's (1998) suggestion that 'certain phrases... decontextualised and excerpted from the theoretical history of a discipline reinventing itself' have been manipulated in such a way that notions of language and reality, the cultural construction of values, and perhaps most obviously 'the death of the author' have subsequently come to take on 'new and often implausible meanings' (p. 9).

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[22] Turner cites the coverage of the Demidenko affair, and we could also include here in more recent times, Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love* (both women were accussed of author fraud), and the publication of Helen Garner's *Feel of Steel* on television programs such as the *7.30 Report* (See Bowden 2004, O'Brien 2008 and O'Donnell 2004), and the role that *Oprah's Book Club* has played in bringing 'literature' to people who might not have otherwise been exposed to such texts.

Peter Rose, editor of the *Australian Book Review* (ABR) since 2001, and book reviewer and literary critic (he does not, interestingly, discriminate between the two terms although he does consider himself an 'amateur'), asserts two apparent problems with the contemporary book review. 'No other genre', Rose (2005) suggests, 'gets away with such liberties, smugness or sloppiness' (p.30). As an 'influential genre' in the Australian literary scene, Rose regrets that it is one that fails to be self-reflexive and 'transparent' (p. 30). And further to this, he suggests that in mainstream publications, in particular, 'proper critical scrutiny of our literary diversity and talent' (p. 31) is being hindered by an issue of space. Rose (2005) laments that

> Here, the nexus between criticism and promotion becomes worryingly manifest. Only a master of concision can do anything interesting or original in a 150 word 'short', yet these take up more and more space in our newspapers, even our better metropolitan ones... The reliance on existing information and opinion is often apparent in these columns. We see the influence of the cover blurb, the sales sheet and the author's biography. (p. 31)

In this regard, in the mainstream press at least, there are arguably few outlets or 'positions' for the critical discussion of literature. However, as Carter (2001) notes, there certainly seems to be an ever-increasing audience for literature. Indeed, Carter's examination of the rise of local book clubs and the widely popular literary festival seems to suggest that in some respects the 'literary dialogue' has shifted forums.

The debate continues... academic versus amateur

In staking a claim for the wider, more global phenomenon of the contemporary essay, Davis (1999) draws Foucault, amongst others, into the debate as an immensely popular, best selling essayist. His definition is broad. Part of Davis's issue with the Australian essay collections (Salusinszky's *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays*, Craven's *The Best Australian Essays 1998*, Fraser's *Seams of Light*, Dessaix's *And So Forth*, Manne's *The Way We Live Now*) is the implicit claim that these publications have set about to reinvigorate the moribund genre of the essay and impede moral/aesthetic decline. In coining the term 'contemporary academic essay', Davis sets forth a counter claim – that the essay is most certainly *not* in decline. Indeed Davis (1999) asserts

> The international trade in essays is now academic. It's only possible to pretend that the essay has fallen into decline as a form by equally pretending that academics haven't turned the essay into a multi-million dollar global industry. (p. 7)

A large part of Davis's (1999) argument is framed by the ostensibly narrow definition the 'liberal coterie' has given to the essay form. The publishing of particular kinds of essays in Australia, presented along with the claim that the 'essay has fallen into abeyance' (p. 7) fails to consider, in Davis's view, other broader and apparently more popular examples of the form. For Davis this is not only further testimony to his 'gangs at work' thesis, but also serves to show why this particular instance of the essay is to be viewed with a great deal of scepticism.

Perhaps what this reveals more than anything, however, is the tenuous premise on which genre discussions lie. Aesthetically and ethically the personal or familiar essay has the potential for both positive and negative outcomes. But is what we see in the Australian context, in the publications claiming the status of *essay* more overtly than any others, examples of the personal/familiar essay doing its apparent bourgeois best? Certainly this would not seem to be the case as the analysis of *The Best Australian Essays* in the following chapter shows. There are two claims that require further investigation here; firstly, that the contemporary Australian essay in its most visible form, takes on the attributes of the personal, the self-reflexive, the accessible, the spontaneous, centred on lived experience: the essay in the Montaignean tradition; and secondly, that the personal essay, as an 'aesthetic' form, is always inherently bourgeois.

Davis and Carter make a claim for the role of both the academic essay and academic research as valuable modes of public and intellectual debate, perhaps over and above that of the practices of Australia's celebrity 'public intellectuals'. Problematically, for this discussion at least, in both of their texts, other than the essay practitioner as an individual, neither attempts to define or determine how the academic essay mode is different, specifically in relation to its apparently Montaignean, non-academic

counterpart. And it would seem that there is an underlying assumption that this is the case.

This is problematic because, in the US at least, academics *are* turning to the personal mode of the essay as a means by which they are able to move away from the restrictions of traditional academic prose associated with particular disciplines. While Carter's and Davis's claims for the academic essay signal something of a democratisation of the form, both fail to engage in the range of scholarly work on the essay which argues that as a form, the essay, as inherently personal and sceptical, offers an alternative to traditional, objective and fixed discursive structures, the kinds of discursive structures usually associated with academe.

The status of Foucault as essayist is not necessarily of great or immediate concern here. However, what this Foucauldian issue does highlight is the continuing struggle between the professionals and the amateurs, the intellectuals within the academy and those outside of it; and who claims whom for their 'team'. However, the irony of the situation of course is that many of Australia's public intellectuals have come out of the academy, whilst others are still in it. The teams in this conflict are perhaps not fixed then; indeed, as Davis asserts, Peter Craven, a so-called amateur, suggests that he himself 'found' Foucault, and so too it would seem does Luke Slattery, also an amateur. Whatever the case, the argument remains virtually unchanged. The public, non-academic intellectuals protest that the academy and its members are too specialist, insular, discursively elitist, and intentionally removed from public discourse. Conversely, the academic, non-public intellectuals object to the un-reflexive, 'independent', discursively elitist, and commercial media-bound amateurs. Other than "the ties that bind", one might suggest that *both* parties are potentially guilty of *all* of these things.

Ultimately we are less concerned with the 'us' and 'them' debate than we are with the essay forms which 'us' and 'them' produce and publish. Yet these debates do contextualise the essay form in Australia, and are highly important to this project in the sense that the locations, gatekeepers and practitioners within the Australian

literary scene determine what works get space, and what are held up as highly visible exemplars of the contemporary Australian essay.

These essays published by 'us' and 'them' are examined in more detail in the following chapter. Here a close examination of *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008 reveals the kinds of essays and essayists most prominently seen in the 'best of' anthologies. Also, this examination highlights the similarities and differences between the various editorial approaches to the collections, and considers individual exemplars of the essays utilising a macro and micro approach to textual analysis as outline in Chapter 3.

Part IV

Textual analysis: *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies 2000-2008

Chapter 5

Narrowing the focus: *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008

The following chapter sets out to analyse *The Best Australian Essays* collections between 2000 and 2008. It should be noted that *The Best Australian Essays* series began in 1998 under the Bookman Press imprint, and has been published since 2000 by Black Inc. Both were imprints of Schwartz Publishing; the former, which was Schwartz's 'unashamedly commercial' imprint, has now been sold. Black Inc., however, remains as Schwartz Publishing's 'pure' imprint (Wyndam 2004).

The following analysis, while focussing primarily on the anthologies from 2000 onwards, does look back to the 1998-99 collections in recognition of the significance of these publications in the life of this series. As the previous chapter shows, the 1998-99 collections have been the subject of other examinations, specifically those of Davis (1999) and Carter (2001). Indeed, this analysis seeks to build upon their work, recognising many of their important criticisms and concessions, within, however, the context of a fresh, although obviously inherently linked, set of texts.

The examination and analysis of *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008 is framed within the historical, theoretical, and cultural discussions set out in the preceding chapters. In this regard it recognises the origins and inevitable diversions which comprise a contemporary understanding of the essay genre and it seeks to implement the methods and perspectives of "new rhetorical" theory to this analysis – one which is both a macro and micro examination of the text, adopting a broad use of theory and methodology as appropriate to the aims and objectives of the project.

As such, the examination that follows considers the editors' claims for *The Best Australian Essays* collections and their views of the genre – broadly, and within the national (and annual) context. These 'claims', found in the introductions to the anthologies, express (for the most part) a deep appreciation for the essay – particularly those examples which follow the Montaignean tradition. Yet despite the high value placed on what we can, for argument's sake, consider to be a 'utopian ideal' of the genre, all editors approach the task of compilation and composition of the collections with varied, sometimes contradictory, and in the case of Marr, virtually no guiding principles as to what constitutes an example of the essay, or indeed, an exemplary or "best" sample thereof. It becomes apparent, on reading the introductions of each of the editors, that some have approached the task in a more informed and measured way than others. However, each *The Best Australian Essays*, is, as the following examination reveals, ultimately a collection reflecting one person's preference for particular texts (closely or loosely) affiliated with the essay genre.

Moving on from the editors' claims, this examination considers in more specific detail the collections each has compiled, under the sub-heading 'Essay sources and essayists in *The Best Australian Essays*'. This section analyses from where each of the editors has sourced their 'best of' exemplars and considers, with something of a backward glance to Davis's (1999) 'liberal coterie', the essayists published in the collections.

To begin to understand how the influence of the editors on *The Best Australian Essays* series has produced a different text (or set of texts), it is necessary to examine in greater detail the kinds of essays published by each. Following on from the previous section, this chapter moves onto a close analysis of the essays in the nine *The Best Australian Essays* publications from 2000-2008. Here a methodology, based on Swales's (1990) own methods for the study of genre, has been implemented to categorise and examine the essays in the various anthologies. For the purposes of this project the essays in *The Best Australian Essays* have been divided into six categories, or sub-genres. Each essay from the nine texts has been identified as belonging to a sub-genre(s) using a framework of purpose, form, structure and reader expectation. Following an examination of each of the six sub-genres identified, is a close analysis

of a selected essay text from that sub-genre. And finally, in this chapter, the type of essays published by the four editors are considered, in more quantitative terms, to reveal something of a map, when pieced together with the earlier analyses, of *The Best Australian Essays* over the nine publications from 2000-2008.

Positioning *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies – the editors' claims

In collecting a selection of texts and labelling them as the "best" essays written in Australia for that particular year, there is an implicit commercial, and perhaps more notably, a value judgement, which sets up particular texts and particular authors as exemplars of the contemporary Australian essay. A necessary question then arises, when we consider that it is largely the editor determining the nation's "best" essays, that is: 'How is the essay genre conceived by the respective editors, Peter Craven 1998-2003, Robert Dessaix 2004-2005, Drusilla Modjeska 2006-2007, and David Marr 2008?'

Peter Craven 1998-2003: loose definitions and a non-concerned concern for/with the essay form

To gauge, in the first instance, Craven's understanding of the form, it is helpful to turn to the first two anthologies from 1998 and 1999, although these will not be included in the close analysis to follow, and then examine those in the years 2000-2003 for which he was also the editor. The introduction to *The Best Australian Essays 1998*, the first of the series, contains a number of key words that seek to strike a chord of understanding of the essay with an assumed readership. The nouns *school* and *literary journalist*, and the adjective *belletristic,* set the scene. For Craven the essay has origins in those school tasks of *belles lettres* styling, in which students were required to write their 'head[s] off' on such 'helter-skelter' topics as 'Hamlet's madness' and the political writings of Manning Clark. Craven views these writing tasks, and the subsequent skills attained via their practice, as significant pedagogical exercises, more

so in fact than his tertiary education, to be later utilised in the formation of his career as a 'literary journalist'.

Further links between journalism and the essay are made by Craven in the second paragraph of his introduction in which he invokes, arguably 'modern journalism's' most recognisable figures, Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer, with their 'techniques and tricks of fiction'. Here too, he suggests, the works of 'Chesterton and Thurber, Mencken and Orwell and A.A. Phillips' help to form an understanding of perhaps a more traditional essay canon, one replaced, to some degree in later years, by more radical forms seen in the work of Wolfe, Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson and Michel Foucault.

Craven suggests that the essay in Australia was once 'all around'; that there was a time, in his youth, when essays were more readily available in newspapers – essays by esteemed writers such as Walter Murdoch and Charmian Clift. These essays were at once about 'nothing', or rather, 'the small things in life' and yet distinguished by their 'crystalline prose [and], wonderful humour' (p. (ix). Yet Australia's essayists have, suggests Craven (1998), 'insinuated themselves so quietly into the national life that they might almost have not been there' (p. ix). Part of this condition lives on in contemporary times, despite the rise of the celebrity author, because, Craven argues, the apparent 'tabsheet' style of news publishing is not concerned with the 'kind of individualistic voice that can survive the fish and chip wrapping' – the kind of voice which one might associate with essay writing. The implication is that the essay is seen as too highbrow to sustain a position in contemporary news publications and, therefore, that Australian essays have been sidelined by the mainstream press.

The result of this sidelining, Craven suggests, is that most essays, in both his traditional and radical understandings of the form, are published in books or literary magazines. In these publications, however, he notes that the readership diminishes to a few thousand. His concern is an interesting one in this context, given that the majority of the essays he selected for the 2000-2003 collections were in fact sourced from Australian newspapers, particularly *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald.*

The New Yorker and *The New York Review of Books* also appear as references in Craven's introduction. These are, of course, well known publications, with high international circulations, and are renowned for the quality of essays they publish. From school, to journalism and then America, Craven's elucidation of the essay form inevitably moves on from *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books* to America's own *Best Essays* collections, from which, Craven admits unashamedly, the 1998 Australian anthology 'so manifestly follows'. Certainly in terms of cover styling the two collections are similar, but Craven (1998) argues that the content differs in that

> The American essay— if we may essentialise it for a moment— is all about the delineation of a self which sees life as a story... I've always hated girls with blue eyes, they say. My father, my fucking father [and so on]... This is essay-writing with a hook, this is ancient mariner stuff... stories in this line of business are the name of the game. (pp. xii-xiii)

Craven is seemingly enamoured by such essay writing, but cautions that the definition of the essay should not be restricted, perhaps rather simplistically, to nonfiction stories. Thus, Craven ultimately argues that *The Best Australian Essays 1998* is more pluralistic than its American counterpart, in that it includes 'reportage alongside of longish analytical articles, essays which grab you by the arm with a storyteller's technique alongside book reviews and sports stories and talks' (p. xiii). This argument does, however, raise the question as to whether or not such an open consideration of the essay form for the purposes of the collection is one that is ideologically based, a democratisation of the form, or one of necessity. Perhaps the loose boundaries Craven assigns to the essay genre in this first 'Best' collection serve to grant access to more potential 'essay' pieces than might otherwise have been available within the confines of a more 'traditional' view of the form.

Craven's introduction to *The Best Australia Essays 1999* continues along much the same lines as that of 1998. There is a re-articulated claim for the legitimacy of a broad consideration of the essay form, in a climate, Craven argues, in which Australian newspapers 'no longer feel the same obligation to map the significance of what has

happened' (p. viii). According to Craven, we seek such literary sustenance elsewhere, in essays, for example.

It is not until the introduction to *The Best Australian Essays 2000* that Craven seeks to articulate the history of the essay form to any great degree. Montaigne and Dr Johnson are mentioned in the 1998 introduction, but reading this is unlikely to signal to the novice the significance of the work of these two men in the establishment of the essay genre. In the 2000 collection, Craven's historical tracings of the essay form stretch back to St Paul's epistles and Augustine. This line of thinking echoes that of scholars such as Lopate (1995),[1] and we see in this introduction to *The Best Australian Essays* an attempt to navigate the complexities of this genre with a greater historical and contextual understanding. The opening paragraph of the 2000 introduction signals the clearest attempt to define the essay, however open, thus far:

> 'essay' is the word we use when something in a paper or magazine seems to have more than an ephemeral value or when something by an intellectual seems to communicate to more than a specialised audience. (Craven 2000, p. xi)

There is a familiar ring to Craven's articulations in his delineation of the form. This is evidenced, for example, in his view of the contemporary essay and its audience:

> We are still reading the essay in order to enjoy the spectacle of the mind's self-portraiture, we still enjoy essays which are primarily investigations of the writer's sensibility in the way the lyric poem can be and we are also the heirs to that slightly later tradition (developed in tandem with the rise of journalism) of the essay, the shorter nonfiction form, as the natural form for telling a story that is true or marshalling an argument that wants to be true. (p. xii)

Craven's pairing of the essay with the lyric poem shares similarities to the ideas of Salusinszky (1997), who wrote in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Australian Essays,* 'the essayist is closer to the lyric poet than the writer of fiction' (p. 2). Similarly, the 'spectacle of the mind's self-portraiture', as Craven writes, has long been held up as a hallmark of the form, and indeed, as we have seen, the essay as a cognitive act is central to both Lukács' and Adorno's theory of the form. We thus see in Craven's

[1] See also, Benson 1923, Dobree 1946 and Hardison 1990, for example.

consideration of the essay, a much broader, and seemingly more demonstrably informed conception of the essay, in all its guises. With this apparent greater and more definitive articulation of the essay form (although it is never reductionist), however, the 2000 collection is arguably more broadly inclusive than those that preceded it; Craven asserts:

> To varying degrees the pieces of writing collected in this year's *Best Essays* volume will reflect the different potentials of the essay form, bearing in mind the term 'essay' is one of the loosest ones we have and in this series I have deliberately used it with maximum latitude to include any instance of non-fictional writing I like (as well as one or two where the lines of demarcation are impossible to draw). (p. xii)

In the 2001 *The Best Australian Essays* collection, delineations of the essay form are much more subdued, given, as Craven articulates, 'The Chinese curse of interesting times' (p. ix) hanging over the world, and therefore the anthology, of this year. However, again 'maximum latitude' is prescribed to the essay because, quite simply, Craven 'think[s] it must be' (p. ix).

The broad scope which Craven has given to the anthologies has resulted in some criticism over his editorial choices. In the introduction to *The Best Australian Essays 2002* he defends these choices as having been informed, to some degree, by necessity:

> In practice we use the word 'essay' to cover our most elementary and everyday senses of non-fiction writing. Primary-school children write essays about their day at the beach and university students write essays about the gendering of consciousness... if essay writing is all around us rather than a subset of that writing – the Montaignean essay, the Chestertonian essay, the essay that trickles like honey and sounds like Garrison Keillor – then a lot more becomes possible for an editor trying to put together a collection of the last year's non-fiction (Craven 2002, p. x).

Craven concedes that a loose definition of the essay form opens up greater possibilities for the editor of an essay anthology. In a similar vein, he suggests that, in seeking exemplars of the Australian essay, we should not submit to the ostensible

charm associated with traditional conceptions of the essay. Yet surely he is still seeking something of an essay *style* when he writes:

> We should not go in quest of the Great Australian Essay up some gum tree of Australian solipsism (though it may be found there among other places). In other words we should not enthral ourselves with the idea of the essay too much. We should look for it in our bread and butter writing. If we seek it we will find it and when we find it, sometimes in modest and unobtrusive places, it is likely to be more classical and more strange than we had imagined. (p. xi)

It seems perhaps rather odd to label a collection as specifically located within the essay genre (and therefore the history of that genre), and more than this, to declare the contents the best the nation has to offer, only to then suggest that one should not be too enthralled by the idea of the essay. Surely the essay is so historically bound up in issues of genre definition and legitimation, that if one didn't want to get involved in such a dialogue, one might perhaps label a body of writing with a less contentious, but perhaps not as marketable, term. More than this, if one is not enthralled with the idea of the essay, why seek it in the first place?

Ultimately, Craven's response to his critics' concerns with his conception of the essay turns into an attack on the academy. The criticism[2] inciting his response below rises from academe, and hence Craven (2002) argues that academics who presume to know what the 'essay' is are 'at least subliminally... buttressed by the belief that essays are things they mark' (p. xi). Craven's argument continues:

> ... Lord, what would they say if Hazlitt walked their way? ... One of the things that needs to be battled a propos of the *Best Essays* series, in some intellectual circles, is the constricted prestige consciousness that thinks too easily that it knows what the essay is and construes it in terms that are inflated and costively academic. (p. xi)

The battle lines Craven has drawn here are very murky indeed. It seems that he is suggesting that the academy lays claim to a view of the essay as one which is,

[2] See Don Anderson's review of *The Best Australian Essays 2001*, entitled 'This is not an essay' in *Australian Book Review*, December 2001/January 2002. Don Anderson is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Sydney.

returning to the discourse of previous chapters, formal and thesis-support bound – supposedly *not* Montaignean. Yet surely, if we are going to enter into a discussion of the academy's relationship with the essay, it is these institutions and in particular their English departments who serve, for better or worse, to continue to canonise essayists such as Hazlitt.

It is unclear what exactly Craven is arguing for, or rather against. He does not want to limit the taxonomy of the essay to classical traditions, nor academic appropriations, but there is an implied style he is seeking, 'writing of more than ephemeral interest... coupling knowledge and grace... a true story [told] so well, with such attention to the curvature of the telling, that it transfigures the form of writing it appears to be' (p. xi). This appears to be a fairly 'traditional' understanding of the essay form. Moreover, the 'transfiguring' of the writing – and the implication here is the writing of journalism – such that it appears to be something other than journalism, overlooks, at least to some degree, the history of Australian essay publishing which is strongly linked to our newspapers.[3] This is a point which Cowling and Maurice (1935), and Tennant (1968), are at pains to highlight.

It is in some respects a noble endeavour on which Craven sets out. He has the potential to add a significant new and contemporary element to the discourse associated with the Australian essay, and yet in many ways he is drawn into the age-old contestation between 'professional' and 'amateur' critics. In not getting 'enthralled' in notions of the essay, Craven simultaneously invokes a traditional essay styling to ward off the academics and their formalised discourse, and calls for a broadening of the form (beyond traditional conceptions) by including, potentially, all forms of nonfiction, which should also include the academic essay. While Craven does make some minor concessions in this case 'We will not find it [essays] waiting for us and purring at the gates of academe (or we'll be lucky if we do)' (p xi), he fails

[3] Despite Craven's criticism of contemporary newspapers it is noteworthy that he is a reviewer for *The Australian*. Further, although Craven insinuates in the 1998 collection (p. x) that there are few good literary journalists (that is those writing in a literary manner) in Australia, in 2003 he suggests that journalists and essayists are 'to some extent a version of the same thing' (p. x). There are, it would seem, some inconsistencies in his argument, a point pursued in the following paragraph.

to recognise those academics who he has published in his 2002 collection: Inga Clendinnen, Robert Manne, Jim Davidson, Kerryn Goldsworthy, Bruce Grant, Ihab Hassan, and Leonardo Rodríguez, for example. Perhaps, despite his rhetoric, Craven is aiming for a collection of essays that bridges the divide between Renaissance essaying and academic prose, between poor journalism and bourgeois elitism. Certainly all get a run throughout the series. The problem is, that in arguing for a broad view of the essay, one that incorporates more than just an ease of editorial compilation (but probably does not), Craven's rationale is confusedly haphazard. More than this, in a rather ironic twist, Craven's broadening-concept smacks of the populist, multimedia, intertextual, yet still aesthetically driven (Pope 1998 p. 125) philosophies of that terribly academy-bound theory, postmodernism.

In 2003 Craven's arguments fall in line with those of the previous years. Murdoch and Clift, Craven's childhood reading, the Australian essayist as quiet celebrity, if indeed a celebrity at all, all reappear to reaffirm the position occupied by *The Best Australian Essays* series thus far. And again, Craven writes 'I take the word essay in its extended or loosest sense' (p. xiii). Despite the apparent contradictions and inadequate articulations of Craven's position on the essay, he provides a broad context in which to locate these examples of Australia's 'best' contemporary essays.

In February 2004 the relationship between Schwartz publishing and Peter Craven turned sour, leading to Craven's dismissal from the position as editor of *Quarterly Essay*[4]. He subsequently resigned from the editorship of *The Best Australian Essays*. The split has been well documented in the Australian and international press, in a rather feverish and candid manner, on both sides of the conflict.[5] The proclamation of differing views over the future direction of the *Quarterly Essay* acting as the proverbial 'straw that broke the camel's back' in Craven's dismissal resulted in the appointment of Robert Dessaix, a man with an ostensibly very different conception of the essay genre from that of Craven.

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[4] *Quarterly Essay*, *The Monthly* and *Best Australian Essays* are published by Schwartz Publishing. Craven was editor of both the *Best Australian Essays* and *Quarterly Essay*.

[5] See Craven, Peter 2004 'Still cringing? – A battle for the soul of Australia's Quarterly Essay', *TLS*, 14 May, pp.14-15; and Schwartz, Morry 2004 'Letter to the Editor', *TLS*, 28 May, p. 17.

Robert Dessaix 2004-2005: the gentle voice of the essay

The opening paragraph of Dessaix's introduction to *The Best Australian Essays 2004* is telling and worth quoting in full:

> The era we are living in strikes me as an uncommonly loud one. In the face of cataclysmic events we beat drums and fulminate. In the face of rampant injustice we angrily thump pulpits, trying to shout evil down. And in the face of our own expected nothingness we're apt to babble even more feverishly, swooping about gaudily in the language-clogged air, laughing, chattering and gossiping about little more than our own babble. Little wonder that, in these circumstances, the gentle voice of the traditional essay has been almost drowned out. (p. vii)

Dessaix implies a reverence for the Montaignean essay – more genteel, more self-reflexive, more personal. This apparent preferencing of a particular kind of essay also serves to position *The Best Australian Essays* collection in 2004 differently to those of previous years. Ostensibly there is an inference in Dessaix's opening that the collections under Craven's editorship, in taking the essay in its most broad sense, opened the anthology up to that loud and babbling chatter, which Dessaix so clearly deplores. It would seem that Dessaix has thus set out to 'refine' *The Best Australian Essays*, to reclaim the category of essay as a genre distinguishable by more than its status as appealing nonfiction. Though the breadth given to the essay form may be seen to differ under the editorships of Craven and Dessaix, both seem to share a penchant for the more time-honoured essay form, of 'Chestertonian' (Craven 2002, Dessaix 2004) styling. Dessaix can perhaps be seen to be making a concession to Craven's loose conception of the essay genre when he writes: 'while putting this collection together, I was... surprised by how rare the traditional form had become in Australia in these times of panic and seriously inflamed passions' (p. vii).

Interestingly, towards the end of his introduction, Dessaix claims that he did not set 'rigid' limits or definitions on the terms 'best', 'essay' or 'Australian'. But certainly Dessaix's collection presents a different kind of *best essay* to that seen in the anthologies edited by Craven; one in which the selections are not as *laissez-faire* as Craven's have tended to appear.

In 2005 Dessaix altered the format of *The Best Australian Essays* collection, assembling essays under specific categories according to the form and subject matter of the texts. In this anthology he then provides an introductory statement to each of these sections, rather than one that encompasses the collection as a whole. The contents of *The Best Australian Essays 2005* fall under four subheadings: I Remember When... , Creative Acts, Meditations, and The Way We Live Now. When read together these introductions serve to delineate the kind of essay privileged by Dessaix: essays which suggest 'intimacy', 'intelligence', 'style and 'candour' (p. 3); or offer 'polished company' (p. 59) and 'telling commentaries' which are simultaneously 'self-aware', 'distinctive' and 'conscious of the reader' (p. 219); they also invite 'secluded rumination', 'broodings and daydreams' (p. 133). Thus one is not surprised to find Dessaix evoking Lamb, Hazlitt and Montaigne in the first of his introductions. For Dessaix, the contemporary Australian essayist is clever, wise and aesthetically conscious, very much '*unlike* political commentators in the daily press... ' or 'flip columnists who entertain us on weekends' (p. 133, my italics). The essay, and the implication is certainly the essays in this collection, suggests Dessaix,

> can't be read over breakfast or standing up on the tram. Ideally they should be read in private, preferably in a pool of light in a comfortable chair or propped up in bed on soft pillows, although a park bench suits some. (p. 133).

If as Dessaix suggests 'it is difficult for essayists in these post-modern times to know whom they might be inviting to make this companionable leap with them' (p.3) (that is, who their audience might be) he has certainly in his later ruminations imagined a rather specific reader of essays. It is one who might certainly fit Carter's (2001) 'good taste' and 'sophisticated lifestyle marketing' phenomena of contemporary Australian book culture (p. 5). In this sense it is hard to imagine that Dessaix could have conjured a more obvious essay reader or reading context.

Drusilla Modjeska 2006-2007: Montaigne, Dr Johnson and a healthy Australian essay

In 2006 the editorship of *The Best Australian Essays* changed again, with Drusilla Modjeska taking over from Dessaix. Modjeska, a writer, essayist and novelist, has been published twice in *The Best Australian Essays* collections, both during Craven's editorship. Based on a writing style evident in her many literary nonfiction and essay publications, it is not at all surprising to find Modjeska beginning her ruminations on the essay with Montaigne. Indeed, his name appears in the opening sentence of her introduction. It has perhaps, after all this time, become more interesting to read not what another writer has to say about Montaigne, but which particular essays or sections of essays they choose as a pathway into their own considerations of the form. In her introduction, Modjeska employs the essay 'On experience' and in it 'the difference between eggs' to contextualise her thinking. This narrative, Modjeska tells us, can be read as an allegory for the kind of writing Montaigne championed, and an essay style which Modjeska seems to want to reiterate. This is the anecdotal, detailed, familiar yet revelatory essay utterly bound in lived experience.

Modjeska sets forth her vision of the essay by conjuring Montaigne and also Dr Johnson, Virginia Woolf and Edward Said. In doing so she sets out a framework in which her understanding of the genre can be contextualised, and from which she is able to consider, in what we read as demonstrably *informed* terms, the milieu of the Australian essay.

Unlike Dessaix before her, Modjeska is not concerned about the condition of the contemporary Australian essay; rather she reports that it is 'in good health. Not excellent health, but not poor health either.' (pp. ix-x) Like Dessaix, who felt somewhat disparaged by the babble and chatter he sees in so much Australian writing, Modjeska concedes that there seems to be circulating in the publishing sphere a great deal of 'florid narcissism' in the form of 'my travels, my love affairs, my childhood, my books, even my crawls around pubs... [m]y two bob's worth on anything you like to mention' (p. xi). While this is hardly a phenomenon specific to Australia, its

presence does enable Modjeska to reiterate what it is about the personal essay, when written well, that lifts it above 'a culture of rampant self-display' (p. xi). Like many before her, Modjeska suggests that a good essay contains the element of scepticism revealing both a depth of intellectual and personal rigour, ensuring thus that the personal essay, whilst centred on the 'I', always offers something greater, something reflexive, discerned and profound (p.xi).

In considering the state of the essay in Australia, Modjeska turns her gaze to the practitioners of the form. She laments the lack of 'professionals' practising the essay in contemporary times – 'architects', 'physicists', 'lawyers' or 'astronomers' who might reach out beyond their 'specialties' to a broader 'engaged and intelligent' reading public; yet we learn that the 'writer's essay' is in 'robust' condition (p. x). This condition is sustained, she suggests, by the 'little magazines' which serve as forums for the essay in many of its guises; specifically, *The Monthly*, *Meanjin* and *Griffith Review*. This is a scenario which Modjeska acknowledges is evidenced in her selection of essays for the anthology:

> Where would the architect's personal, rather than expert and professional, essay be published? Where could a lawyer, say, learn the skill of the personal essay? ... Unlike the British broadsheets, say, our newspapers have rarely played this role. You will notice that three essays in this collection come from the British press, while only one originated in an Australian newspaper. (p. x)

This argument has validity, and yet Modjeska's final comment above, if we take the publication details in the back of the collection to be accurate, is patently untrue. In fact, one essay comes from the British press, *The Times Literary Supplement*; one from the American press, *The New York Review of Books*; and four come from an Australian newspaper, *The Australian Financial Review*. Indeed *The Australian Financial Review*, equal only with *The Monthly*, provides the greatest source of essays for this anthology. *Griffith Review*, *Meanjin* and *Reflected Light: La Trobe Essays* (also an anthology) each provide three essays for the collection. A number of other 'little magazines' also get a look in, including *Heat*, *Southerly* and *Westerly*, with one essay each. One might speculate then that the pool from which these essays have been collected is not large – a point that is

perhaps all the more resounding considering that Black Inc is the publisher of *The Monthly*, *Reflected Light: La Trobe Essays* and *The Best Australian Essays*.

In 2007 Modjeska reports that Australia's literary culture is on the 'road to recovery' (p. xi) set against the backdrop of a change in political climate and a reinvigoration of 'intellectual engagement'.[6] Modjeska suggests that in the renewal of such an engagement, there can be seen more loud talk; although one might suggest this is a phenomenon not restricted to the year of 2007 (Dessaix complained of just such a scenario in his introduction to the 2004 collection). Yet in this year, amongst all the apparent noise, Modjeska declares that the personal essay in Australia is 'alive and well' (p. xii). In this collection she also stakes a claim for the review essay[7] in Australia, suggesting that it has now come of age in this country, thanks in part to the 'fall of Howard' and publications such as *The Australian Financial Review*, *The Monthly* and *Australian Literary Review*.

At the end of her introduction to the 2007 *The Best Australian Essays*, Modjeska, certainly aware of the political context in which she is writing, insists that our future will be determined in part 'by how we walk, right here, now... how we write, how we read, how we think, how we argue' (p. xiii). It is one of the most poignant and indeed political stands we have seen articulated for the essay in *The Best Australian Essays* collections thus far. Yet on one level it is hard not to read this statement without a little scepticism, for while Modjeska signals that the essay has the potential to significantly shape our cultural position, whatever that may be, it is worth bearing in mind that 10 of the 27 essays published in the 2007 *The Best Australian Essays* have come from *The Monthly*. Notably *The Monthly* and *The Best Australian Essays* share the same publisher. Thus there is a sense in which the claims for the essay form, as prescribed by Modjeska, are somewhat self-serving.

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[6] It should be noted that Modjeska's discussion of a change in political mood was penned prior to the federal election and although she talks of the 'fall of Howard' her reference here is to the opinion polls – not the result of the election.

[7] In this project, what Modjeska terms the 'review essay' falls into the category of 'critical essay' for the purposes of analysis. The categories and criteria for the establishment of such categories of analysis are outlined in the 'Close analysis: Australia's "best" essays' section later in this chapter.

David Marr 2008: a 'surprisingly lazy' non-attempt at defining the essay

The Best Australian Essays 2008 falls into the editorial hands of David Marr. Unlike Craven, Dessaix and Modjeska before him, Marr does not concern himself greatly with the issues of genre definition, practitioners, and a history of the form. His approach to a notion of the essay is rather casual: 'I also have to confess I never really worked out what an essay is' (p. x). Nor, one suspects, did he really try. Indeed, his suggestion that, as an editor of *The Best Australian Essays,* he should be able to 'give a crisp definition [of the essay] that settles the issue one way or another' (p. x) reflects either a lack of understanding of the complexities of the form, or probably more accurately, a disinterest in engaging with issues of nomenclature, and a scholarly history of the form. Bilson (2009) describes Marr's introduction to the 2008 anthology as 'surprisingly lazy' (p. 12). What Marr *does* tell us, in regards to his conception of the essay, is what it is not – it is not verse, speeches or 'anything longer than about 10,000 words' (p. x).

Much of Marr's introduction tells us not so much about the essay form as about his approach to editing the anthology. In this, he reveals that 'passionate refutations' and 'great events' did not produce the 'great essays' he might have expected. For Marr, 'good writers set their own agenda' and therefore his 2008 anthology 'isn't the Australia of politicians and media combines' (p. xi). Yet it is, arguably, an Australia with Black Inc all over it – of the 31 essays in this collection, 12 were first published in *The Monthly.*

Marr has divided the 2008 collection into five sections: the world; our place; families; writing, painting, playing, taking pictures; and life and death. These divisions are interesting because there are a number of essays that could have been placed in other categories to those they were assigned. Vin Maskell's 'My Brother's Jumper' (families), for example, could easily have been positioned under 'life and death'; similarly, Cullen Murphy's 'A Tale of Two Sittings' (our place) could have been located under 'families' or 'writing, painting, playing, taking pictures'; and Christos Tsilokas' 'Into a Liquid Ether' (the world), under 'our place'.

Unlike both Dessaix's 2004 collection, and Modjeska's 2007 collection (although she does not label her sections, rather indicates a shift in form or subject with an asterisk), the sections in Marr's anthology seem somewhat haphazard. Marr has made no attempt to discuss the various kinds of essays appearing in the collection, nor offer a rationale for the sub-sections, which serve, usually, to guide the reader through the *story* of the collection as a whole. As a result, it is not apparent to the reader why particular essays are located under one section, and not another.

Each of the four editors, as one might expect, approach the task of compiling *The Best Australian Essays* with varying notions of the genre, selections of particular kinds of writing, and varying agendas with regards to the literary potential of the essay. Although Marr arguably, has no apparent views on the possibilities to which the essay, as a form, might afford. Yet within each of the editor's collections, as much as there are diversions, there are also many points of convergence.

Essay sources and essayists in *The Best Australian Essays*

Having considered the editors' claims for *The Best Australian Essays,* the following section provides a detailed overview of *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008 anthologies' sources for essays and essayists. These overviews are categorised by editor and serve to show the similarities and differences in editorial choice, and therefore, in the individual anthologies.

Essay sources

The sources of *The Best Australian Essays* can be divided into eight categories: Australian newspapers, Australian magazines, International newspapers, International magazines, previously unpublished essays, books, speeches and miscellaneous. Australian newspapers from which essays were sourced include *The Age*, *The Australian*, *The Australian Financial Review*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Herald Sun*,

and *The Advertiser*. Of these, *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian Financial Review* were the most common.

The Australian magazine section, apart from one inclusion from *The Australian Women's Weekly*, sourced its essays from literary and/or cultural magazines – two of which, *Griffith Review* and *The Monthly*, were new to the market in 2003 and 2005 respectively. Both of these magazines, particularly *The Monthly*, have become significant sources for *The Best Australian Essays*. *The Monthly* has become the most popular of the cultural magazines, followed by *Meanjin* and *Griffith Review* and *Australian Book Review* (the latter only during Craven's editorship). Other Australian magazines from which essays have been sourced consistently included *Heat*, *The Bulletin* (now out of print), and *Southerly*.

Another area from which a sizable number of *The Best Australian Essays* were sourced was that of unpublished essays. These essays were published for the first time in *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies. Each collection contains previously unpublished essays, although only in Craven's collections in 2000, 2001 and 2002 are these acknowledged. In Modjeska's 2006 and 2007 anthologies, the unpublished essays are indicated only by the absence of credit to the original source at the end of the essays; credit to the original source is given for all previously published essays. This is also the case in Marr's 2008 anthology. Dessaix's 2004 and 2005 anthologies similarly indicate previously unpublished essays by an absence of 'publication details' at the end of each book. [8]

International newspapers include only *The Guardian* and *The Observer*; the category of international magazines, conversely, is broader, including for example, a French and a German magazine; however, the key international magazines from which *The Best Australian Essays* were sourced are *The London Review of Books*, *The New York Review of Books* and *The New Yorker*.

[8] Notably, for the past three *Best Australian Essays*, there has been a call for submissions of essays on the Black Inc web site.

The Best Australian Essays sourced from published books ranked comparably with essays sourced from international magazines. Some of the essays were published in their original form, while others were modified for inclusion in *The Best Australian Essays*. Many of the books from which *The Best Australian Essays* were sourced were not essay anthologies and some of these essays are labelled in *The Best Australian Essays* collections as 'introductions', 'extracts' or 'versions'.

'Speeches' and 'miscellaneous' make up the two smallest categories from which *The Best Australian Essays* have been sourced. The speeches comprise mostly lectures and seminar papers. One speech was delivered to the Senate and two were sourced from television. From this latter category one essay was originally an interview and the other a 'speech' delivered on the television comedy show *The Games*. There were few miscellaneous sources, comprising mostly extracts from pamphlets and catalogues from exhibitions and arts/cultural institutions.

The figures on the following page show the sources of *The Best Australian Essays* under each of the four editors: Craven, Dessaix, Modjeska, and Marr.

For Craven, Australian newspapers were the main source for *The Best Australian Essays*, followed by Australian magazines. The next most significant category in the Craven collections was unpublished essays; indeed Craven's collections contained the highest number of previously unpublished essays.

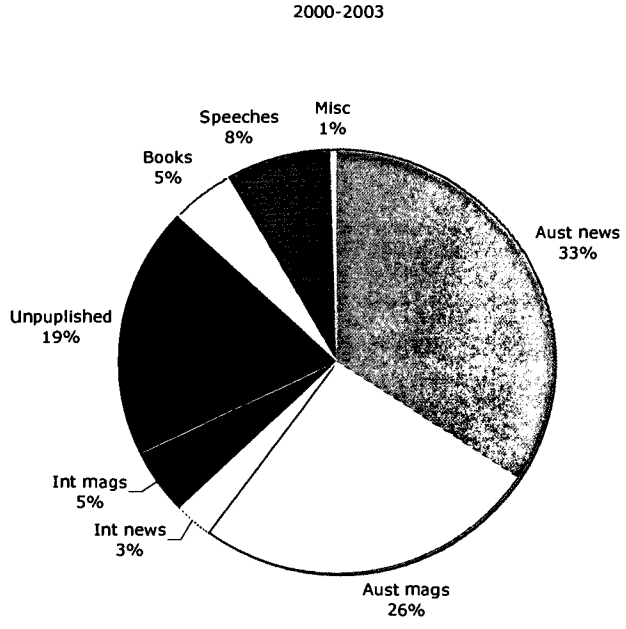


Figure 7 Sources of *The Best Australian Essays* under Craven's editorship 2000-2003

Under both Dessaix's and Modjeska's editorships, there is a significant shift away from essays sourced from Australian newspapers. This shift sees a move towards Australian magazines, with a large increase in the percentage of essays sourced from these publications. This indicates, at least in terms of editorial preference, a move away from the essay as journalism and a move toward the essay as a literary/critical form. Yet interestingly, when we compare the occurrence of the essay sub-genres under each editor, particularly those of Craven and Modjeska, the original source of the essays does not necessarily alter the *kinds* of essays published. That is, in terms of the sub-genres occurring within the each editor's collections, Craven and Modjeska are most similar; yet their sources of *The Best Australian Essays* differ, most notably in the split between magazines and newspapers.

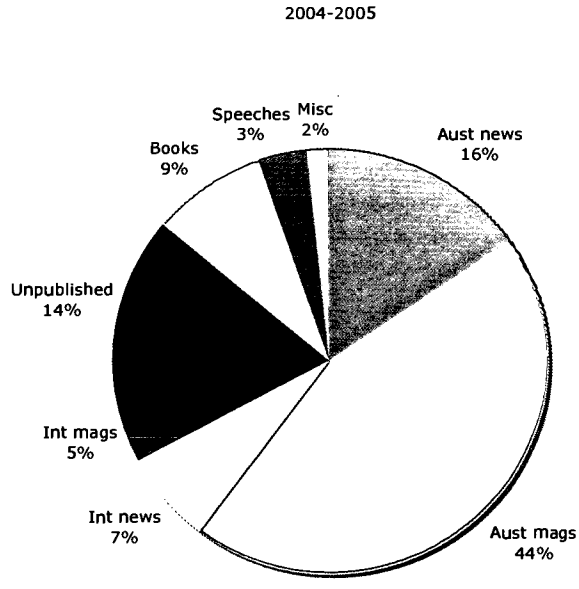


Figure 8 Sources of *The Best Australian Essays* under Dessaix's editorship 2004-2005

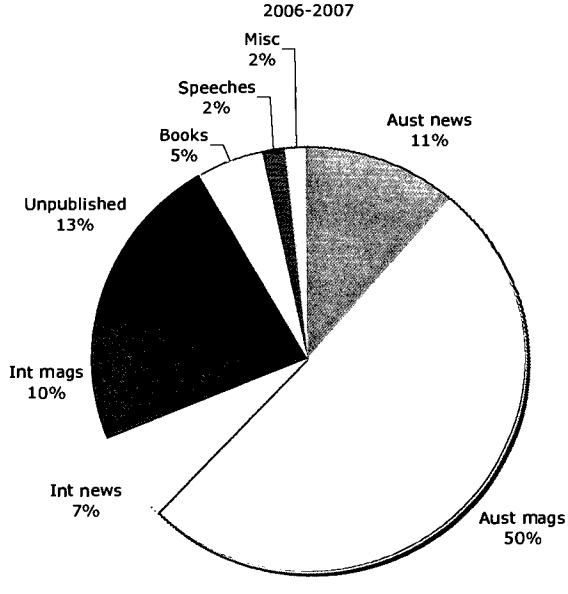


Figure 9 Sources of *The Best Australian Essays* under Modjeska's editorship 2006-2007

Australian newspapers as sources for essays under David Marr's editorship, stand at 39%, the highest percentage for the category among the four editors – perhaps not surprisingly, given his links to journalism. However, while this number is comparatively high, the greatest source of essays in the 2008 anthology is, as with Dessaix's and Modjeska's collections, from Australian magazines. Unlike his predecessors, Marr has no inclusions from international magazines, speeches or the miscellaneous category. While 49% of Marr's inclusions, 15 of 31 essays, come from Australian magazines, of these 15 essays, 12 were sourced from *The Monthly*. Again, *The Monthly* and *The Best Australian Essays* are both published by Black Inc.

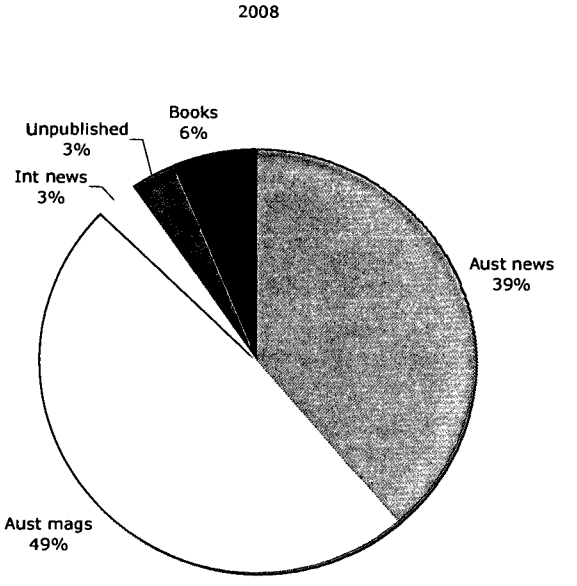


Figure 10 Sources of *The Best Australian Essays* under Marr's editorship 2008

Essayists

In her introduction to the 2006 *The Best Australian Essays*, Modjeska suggests that the 'writer's essay' (p. x) is in good supply, a suggestion validated by the fact that of the 29 essayists who have been published in *The Best Australian Essays* 3 or more times, 22 can be credited as writers. Many of the writers are also academics, scientists, historians, editors or journalists, in fact of these 22 'writers', there are only seven for whom writing might be considered as their sole occupation.

The most published essayist in *The Best Australian Essays* is Robert Manne, whose work appears in 8 of the 9 collections from 2000-2008. Manne is Editorial Board Chairman for *The Monthly*, and an academic. He is also so widely published that it would be hard to deny him the title of writer, and certainly public intellectual. Indeed, all 11 academics published 3 or more times in *The Best Australian Essays* can be considered as academics *and* writers/public intellectuals for much the same reason.

Not surprisingly, the 'Notes on Contributors' section at the end of each *The Best Australian Essays* collection seeks to emphasise the writerly credentials of the essayists published. For those who have not been widely published, professional and intellectual qualifications are offered. Arguably these notes support the view that the essayists published in *The Best Australian Essays* occupy the realm of the public intellectual. There is an assumption that readers, publishers, and, therefore, editors, expect that those offering up 'something of the rhythm of our concerns and thinking' (Modjeska 2006, p. xi) must be seen to be allied with those occupations or professions in which the ability to pontificate is legitimised, in the very least, by those occupations or professions.

As discussed earlier, in Modjeska's 2006 introduction she expresses a wish to see 'other' professionals (non writers, non academics, non journalists) writing and publishing essays; but she sees this proposition apparently sidelined by a lack of publications in which these would-be essayists might get a foothold. This certainly

brings to the fore issues of gatekeepers and the Australian essay. There is some irony in Modjeska calling for an expansion of essay talent beyond Davis's (1999) coterie (of which she is an apparent member) when as editor she has published so many in this group (Robert Manne, Helen Garner, Inga Clendinnen, Kerryn Goldsworthy, Judith Brett) who, along with others included in her 2007 collection, had their essays originally published in Black Inc's *The Monthly*. Despite her ruminations, there seems to be a limited attempt on Modjeska's part to help open doors for fledgling public intellectuals. While it is in a sense disobliging to begrudge local independent publishers the right to promote their own publications and talent, however subtly or overtly, arguably the ability to carry out such promotion with any degree of finesse (such that it might avoid the label of 'self-serving') is compromised by declarations such as those made by Modjeska.

It is timely to return to Carter's discussion of the public intellectual as a 'personal' rather than 'professional' being. The ten most published essayists in *The Best Australian Essays* are: Robert Manne (8), Peter Conrad (6), Helen Garner (6), Inga Clendinnen (6), Tim Flannery (6), Gideon Haigh (6), Guy Rundle (6), Clive James (5), Nicholas Shakespeare (5), and Peter Porter (4). For readers with a literary/cultural/historical interest these will be familiar names. There is a high probability that even those outside of these discourse communities know of Tim Flannery (Australian of the Year 2007), and Clive James (prolific in both print and broadcast media). Any semi-regular reader of the national broadsheets is likely to have come across the names of Robert Manne, Peter Conrad, Helen Garner, Gideon Haigh and Guy Rundle. Ostensibly these essayists are a part of a group we might label as 'Australia's public intellectuals'. They offer moral and ethical opinions/debate on a range of cultural/historical/literary issues and take on a kind of celebrity status as a result of the proliferation of their name/work in the public sphere.

This work, according to Carter (2001), is both useful, in drawing readers into important ethical and moral debates, and problematic in that the dominance of one set of writers/speakers silences others; and similarly the name may become more important than the veracity of the work. Also, in taking on something of the celebrity,

the ethical/moral work becomes intertwined with the marketplace and consumerism. When the ethical or moral work is simultaneously aesthetic, as is often the case with the essay and associated genres, the product becomes inherently linked to the lifestyle market, as a marker of individual status (Carter 2001).

Carter (2001) argues that aesthetic ethical commodities are not inherently or always devalued because of their position as a lifestyle marker amongst cultural groupings. In this sense he respects contemporary literary and cultural theory which suggests that readers will take away various textual meanings based on factors such as their circumstances, education, and context of consumption. In a similar vein it can be argued that the proliferation of certain essayists over others does not necessarily devalue their work; indeed, for the most part, they are prolific *because* of their skills and expertise.

While the public intellectual adopts a position within the community as a personality *outside* of the text (the writer as celebrity – though the degree to which this status is manifest differs between individuals), the persona of the writer *within* the text is as important, indeed more important, if the essay is to realise its theorised potential.

Anderson's (1991) discussion of literary nonfiction as a social text, with an emphasis on the writer's persona directly affecting the view of the discourse subject, is worth returning to as part of this discussion. Anderson (1991) believes that a reader's interpretation of a text's subject is made via the language and position of the narrator of the text. For proponents of the utopian essay, a potential connection between reader, narrator and subject is greatest when the narrator is personalised within the text, not endeavouring to remove herself from it in order to achieve a sense of objectivity.

In considering the essayists who dominate *The Best Australian Essays*, there is no apparent continuity in the discursive practices they employ to evoke the subject matter and the communities in which they exist. This is where Fairclough's (1995) concern with micro and macro analyses of specific discourse examples is relevant.

That is, while the examination of *The Best Australian Essays* in this section reveals a significant amount about the location, appropriation, and gatekeepers of the essay on a macro level; information as to how specific instances of writerly persona, essay sub-genres, language use, the aesthetic and ethical function (or not) can only be achieved through a process of micro analysis.

The following analysis considers, in detail, the kinds of essays published in *The Best Australian Essays* and looks at the specific choices each of the editors has made. These details provide a map of the intimated divergences and convergences within *The Best Australian Essays,* and also enable the consideration of the kinds of essays most visible in Australia at this time.

Close analysis: Australia's "best" essays

If we accept that the essay is a genre, a 'collection of communicative events' with a 'shared set of communicative purposes' (Swales 1990, p.46) then logically, however provisionally, we must attempt to 'locate' that purpose within the context of *The Best Australian Essays* collections. I do not, however, want to conjure up the already well theorised, and incredibly problematic, 'ideal' essay. With this in mind, the communicative purposes we are considering here are very context specific. The issues surrounding taxonomy and the essay have been well documented in this project. What I am concerned with, therefore, is what we might perceive as the 'purpose' of *The Best Australian Essays* as examples of the contemporary Australian essay.

An argument for such a context specific set of purposes can be read into Swales's declaration that 'a discourse community's nomenclature for genres is an important insight' (1990, p. 55). The premise is thus: we can reasonably argue that in *The Best Australian Essays* we see a well-established discourse community comprising intellectuals, writers and literary critics who occupy a place in the public domain – they write and speak about issues of Australian culture, politics, and identity. Indeed, we may very well consider this to be the recurring rhetorical purpose, or, as Miller (1994) terms it, 'ways of "acting together"' (p. 36). According to Swales, members of this discourse community have the highest level of 'genre-specific expertise' and as

such are in a privileged position to name communicative events that have a 'recurring rhetorical action' (1990, p. 55). In the naming and dating of this class of communicative events as *Australian essays*, we are left with an apparent national, and historical, context within which any analysis must take place, for as the perspectives of "new rhetorical" theory remind us: *context* is as important as the 'arts of discourse' (Andrews 1992, p. 5).

In considering the theories and approaches of genre and rhetoric, the analysis here begins with Swales's notion of a 'definitional cluster approach' which, alongside purpose, form, structure and reader expectation, provides a useful measure of the extent to which an instance of genre is prototypical. This provides a model by which the sub-genres that fall under the umbrella of 'essay' in *The Best Australian Essays* collections might be determined. Here Miller's discussion of genre as an intertwining of 'lower level form' (which comprises 'experience, language, locution, speech act, episode or strategy') and 'characteristic substance' (1994, p.35) also provides further insight. This form of provisional categorisation enables analysis of *The Best Australian Essays* on both a micro and macro level. On a micro level we can begin to unpack and analyse the form, structure and reader expectation, taking into account Miller's notions of experience, language, locution, speech act, episode and strategy, all of which point to an instance of characteristic substance or purpose within individual essays. In dissecting the essays in this way we are further able to establish how these genre issues play out on a macro level, considering the anthologies, individually and as a whole.

In determining the sub-genres apparent in *The Best Australian Essays,* purpose form, and structure are used to locate particular groupings of essays. Based on my reading of the text, I have also considered what 'effect' the text had on me, the reader. Within this context I decided how each of these essay texts might further be situated within the genre code.

Such decisions were not necessarily easily made and inevitably, these essays could have been categorised in a number of ways.[9] Indeed, another reader could have derived entirely different categories. However, I would argue that those categories presented here are in keeping with the discussions and spirit of this thesis. Furthermore, they highlight the narrative structures that can be seen as prototypical of *The Best Australian Essays*. The essays, then, were divided into the following six sub-genres: personal essay; critical essay; literary reportage; politically radical; science/nature/travel essay; and the auto/biographical essay.

The defining features of the six sub-genres are outlined in the following sections. After each definition a detailed, close analysis of an individual *The Best Australian Essays* text for that category is provided. Here the issues of purpose, form, structure and reader expectation are analysed in exemplars from each of my six sub-genres. This analysis enables a closer examination of Miller's (1994) lower levels of form, 'experience, language, locution, speech act, episode or strategy', and 'characteristic substance' (p.35); we can then see how these might function within each of the chosen essay texts.

As stated in the introduction to this project, these analyses are not positioned here as examples of "literary criticism" in a formal or traditional understanding of the term. Rather, the close analyses, utilising a multidisciplinary approach, are intended to demonstrate the writerly choices (in the practical sense of the choices available to the writer, rather than in any strictly Barthesian sense of the term) made by essayists published in *The Best Australian Essays* series, providing something of a map of the appropriation of this highly flexible and much discussed genre, in a quite specific historical and national context – *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008.

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[9] In support of the notion that there are many varying ways in which individual essays in an anthology might be categorised, and as further evidence of the ever present problem of taxonomy, I take some comfort in the 'alternative' contents pages offered in anthologies such as Root, R & Steinberg, M (2001) *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/ on Creative Nonfiction*, 2nd edn, Longman, New York; and Lopate, P (1995) *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Anchor Books, New York. The alternative contents pages in Lopate's anthology, for example, group essays by essayists (their relationship to the history of the genre and their cultural positions), then by theme, and then form. Root and Steinberg offer two contents lists, one by topic and the other by sub-genre. Notably, in their alternative (second) contents the creative nonfiction essays are categorised according to sub-genre, and here individual essays often appear in more than one of the sub-genres listings.

For each of the essay sub-genres, a single essay has been chosen for close analysis, with the exception of the critical essay. Here two essays are analysed; firstly, because this was the sub-genre in which the largest number of *The Best Australian Essays* appeared; and secondly, because the form of the critical essay allowed for multiple approaches (personal, literary, thesis-support). A close analysis of two different forms, one literary and one thesis-support, provided for a greater and more useful assessment of this kind of essay.

The essays chosen here were not necessarily considered to be the finest exemplars (though, to my mind, a number are), ultimately this is an individual value judgement. Rather, these essays seemed to offer the greatest potential for analysis – there was much to be discussed and examined, both positive and negative, in respect to the issues considered in the thesis thus far.

Personal essays

The essay here is centred on personal experience. While many of the essays in *The Best Australian Essays* begin with a personal anecdote, those classified as 'personal essays', use such anecdotes as the central and recurring theme of the text, or build upon the anecdote while retaining the overriding mode of the personal. The examination of personal experience thus constitutes the fundamental purpose of the essay.

The personal essays found in *The Best Australian Essays* encompass Hesse's (1992) notion of the rhetoric of narrative, or story, in the essay. These essays use the first person pronoun, but they also suggest a consciousness of style. One finds 'fictional techniques' such as plot, characters, and dialogue; paragraphs which set scenes, describe places; musings, conversations and interrogations of the essayist's thoughts and opinions; and the obvious voice of the 'fictional' narrator. Through this, the point of persuasion can be seen to lie in the story-like structure of the text. It is this kind of textual structure, as Hesse argues, that acts as a mode of persuasion by the simple fact

of its highly recognisable structure. For Hesse, the story and its form are almost intrinsic.

Further to these notions I would argue that these personal essays persuade, or seek to persuade, through the rendering of the personal. They use the personal as a rhetorical device to legitimise their position; they are filled with the use of the personal 'I': 'I see', 'I picture' 'I knew', with other personal pronouns, and the possessive 'my', 'mine' and 'ours'. This renders a point-of-view which is undeniably that of the essayist. But more than this, it is the opinion of an essayist who has intimated, by the fact of this ownership, an authority over the subject matter, that is, a point of persuasion.

While we see a claim for authority over the text, personal essays seek no fixed conclusions. They are an exploration; questioning, sceptical. Their premise, as Montaigne shows, is the endeavour to discover understanding via the cognitive act of writing. In this way we can see the personal essays in *The Best Australian Essays* in the vein of Heilker's 'chronologic ordering', whereby the text resembles the mind at work (1996, p. 23).

Though the narrators and their experiences form the central theme of the personal essays in *The Best Australian Essays*, there is also in these essays a view of the wider world, demonstrating a thoughtfulness that lifts the text above that 'florid narcissism' which so appalled Modjeska (2006).

We can see how the elements of personal experience, narrative/story, chrono-logic ordering and self-examination come together as a proto-typical example of the personal essay in the table below. This table represents the elements of Swales's[10] definitional cluster approach utilised for determining instances of the personal essay sub-genre in *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies.

[10] Swales's (1990) definitional cluster approach is discussed in detail in Chapter 3, under the sub-heading 'Genre and textual analysis'.

Purpose	Form
- examination of personal experience - writing as cognitive event - sceptical - open	- use of personal 'I' - fictional techniques
	Structure - chrono-logic ordering - ethos and story to persuade
	Reader expectation - shared conversation - personal experience with broader implications - literary/aesthetic quality

Table 1 Overview of the personal essay using Swales's (1996) definitional cluster approach

The following analysis of Donald Horne's essay 'Mind, Body and Age' reveals how these elements work together to persuade, inform and examine, in an exemplar of the personal essay.

Personal essay: 'Mind, Body and Age' by Donald Horne, *The Best Australian Essays 2004*, pp. 72-84

Broadly, this essay can be read as an examination of the body's life cycle, the shift in movement of cultural attitudes, and the portentousness of the act of self-reflection. Horne's text begins with his birth in 1921. It is an event retold with narrative flair, and employs with skill 'fictional techniques' – a story is told. We see in the opening paragraph a mini-narrative in which tension is built; we are introduced to the characters, those both active and passive; Horne's mother is in labour, but there is a 'complication'... then... relief! The complication – the object of tension – is redressed and the baby (Horne) is alive and breathing – as surely he had to be.

This is a powerful introduction to the text, and it is one which serves to draw the reader in absolutely. Before the first paragraph is completed, the reader has been whisked away to another place and time, to bear witness to this miraculous event – the birth of a child. It could easily be the opening to any work of fiction. We can consider then that this essay begins, and indeed continues, along the path of Hesse's (1992) fourth rhetorical mode, narrative, the persuasive element of which lies in its story-like nature. We are persuaded, at least in the first and most obvious instance, to

read on, if for no other reason than we know that this text, because it is story-like, has more to reveal. Horne's essay begins:

> On the day of my birth, Boxing Day, 1921, something seemed wrong in the small rented brick house in the lower-middle-class Sydney suburb of Kogarah. In the real-life nativity scene in the main bedroom, the doctor, the midwife, my grandmother and my mother were witnessing a 'complication' while my father, in the kitchen, decently out of sight of my mother's vulva, dabbed his tears with a tea towel at the threatened stillbirth of his first child. Instead, with the cry of life, I became the sixth person in the brick cottage. (p. 72)

Horne conceives of the body in two parallel forms throughout this essay, as a medical entity and as a cultural one. Overall, however, Horne's enthymeme can be read as the existence of an inextricable link between body and mind, regardless of the various ways in which the body might be theorised. It is this premise that leads to Horne's discussion of age, and in particular, old age. Thus 'mind, body and age', as the title suggests, circle around each other creating a map of Horne's thoughts and understandings.

In this essay, the mind is examined firstly via Horne's "remember"-ing his birth, and then through 'other memories, real ones'. This remembering is always necessarily linked to the body and the ageing process. Having already told of the medical 'complications' associated with his birth, Horne sets out a detailed and descriptive account of the medical incidences of his childhood; thus reaffirming 'the body, overall, as a medical matter'. At three he is retching following a rite-of -passage surgery on his tonsils and adenoids; next, though somewhat less institutional, his father makes enquiries about the regularity of his bowels – 'have you done a pooh?'; a bout of croup, followed the next year by an admittance to hospital with 'congestion of the lungs'; multiple childhood illnesses requiring home visits by the GP – resulting in a rather revered contact with the 'upper middle class'; then hospital again at the age of 12 for the realignment of broken bones. This is followed shortly thereafter by the onset of a 'special kind of medical condition' otherwise known as 'adolescence' a condition for which there was 'no recommended treatment' but throughout which 'such complex attentions to both body and mind' were drawn. We then arrive at

Horne's early 20s, during which he was involved in a rather unfortunate incident involving an army truck, his head and a tree.

Horne's essay is weighted with detail and fact. We are given a 'medical' event, for example, with a short yet telling description, so well written that it is hard to imagine that he might manage to fit any more detail, in so few words, with such stylistic flair. Take for example:

> At the age of twelve, there I was in hospital again (so they could put together an arm broken when some school friends pushed me out of a window) counting out loud as they 'administered the anaesthetic' and waking to the sound of people, miles away, mumbling a conversation that seemed to last for years, with immediately around me the warm, bakehouse smell of the fresh plaster bandage I would wear in a sling for the next six weeks, as if I were a wounded hero. (p. 73)

Horne, it would seem, is a fan of the long cumulative sentence, using it often in this essay; a rather common and close companion to description. Sentences such as these, reveal a great deal. In the example above, we learn how Horne broke his arm, that he had to go to hospital, and that the break was severe enough to require surgery. But more than this, we get an insight into surgical practices, the counting as the anaesthetic is administered, and thereafter both the physical and mental effects of the drugs. Furthermore, Horne reveals details of his experience, such as the smell of the still wet cast, which bring the event to life for the reader, and render it more immediate. Finally, Horne exposes himself as a 'wounded hero', at least in thought: a telling summation of the way in which this twelve-year-old has experienced and 'analysed' the situation of his broken limb.

The relationship between the mind and body is examined in Horne's discussion of the medical and cultural body. As far as the latter is concerned, he is particularly interested in the development, in Australia, of notions of the 'ideal' body. Horne considers that the notion that the body 'could overcome the imperfections that God or natural selection had worked into it' to render it 'ideal' was an 'unimaginable' goal until the advent and discovery of such things as 'antibiotics', 'bio-engineering, cosmetic surgery and now genetic engineering' (p. 74). Importantly, however, he

recognises that elements of the 'ideal' did exist within the pre- and WW II timeframe (seen in advertisements for face creams promoting ideals of 'facial beauty'), and the cultural belief that men should be strong of body, women motherly. Thus big biceps and big bosoms respectively were the ambition of the day. Indeed, big biceps, big bosoms and a beautiful face are still revered features in Australia today, though arguably we are all the more concerned with an ideal 'whole' package.

In contrast to contemporary ideals, Horne's observations about beach bathers back 'then' reveal a rather nostalgic simplicity of being. He writes:

> the realities of bodies were to be seen on beaches, but with so much fatness and skinniness spread out to dry on the sand there wasn't much in the way of classical perfection...

Horne's nostalgia offers up a preferred kind of reading of this essay in which belief and reality are suspended. He is providing an experience of language and life which aims not at the pedantic, but rather the holistic. Thus we are able to read Horne's description of bodies on the beach in simple terms, as just bodies of various shapes and sizes on the beach, bodies apparently uncomplicated by modern-day issues, bodies apparently without issues. While it is true that bodies both fat and thin still adorn Australian beaches today, they occupy a space that is culturally very different; their fatness and skinniness sit within the context of the perfect, beautiful bodies that dominate our media and our psyche. Thus, presumably, the modern day excursion to the beach is made all the more complex by one's body and its location (for the individual and the broader community) in the framework of that ideal. The trip to the beach, by Horne's implication, is no longer just a trip to the beach, because, as he asserts, 'the "perfect body" can become a very influential idea' (p. 76).

Despite the implication that Horne's historical beach goers are without issues, or rather are free to lie about on the beach unconcerned by the attributes of their bodies in relation to their perfection (biceps and bosoms notwithstanding) the 'bronzed Anzac' lifesaver, did epitomise the ideal; particularly as this individual was 'being prepared' for 'the next war' both physically and mentally. The ideal, then, has broader

implications for the wider community; the perfect body here is necessary for the good of the nation. This leads to Horne's explicit assertion that contemporary 'consumers of perfect bodyness' are endowed with narcissism and an ignorance 'of what can be meant by being human' (p. 77). Horne argues that in this instance the body has become a machine, unnaturally separated from the mind. That the body should not be viewed as simply mechanical is, as posited earlier, the enthymeme of this essay.

Part of the inherently flawed nature of the 'perfect' body, for Horne, lies in the notion that there can be no such thing as a 'perfect mind'. Minds, says Horne are 'different', 'not standard', humans are not 'ants', consequently 'it is essential that there be a myriad of differences – if you like "imperfections" – in minds' (p. 77). These ponderings then prompt Horne to consider the effects of illness on the mind and the body.

The mind, for Horne, has thus far been contextualised in the framework of memory and cultural positions which impact on individual's understandings and experiences. However, in the latter part of his essay, the notion of the mind becomes far more centred on personal experience as it affects personal understanding. Here, Horne's story is reinvigorated by more contemporary 'medical matters', in which he, as an adult patient, is in a seemingly greater position to philosophise in order to gain greater understanding, ultimately of himself (body and mind), and his life.

Horne details the onset of his mid and late-life illnesses, showing also a greater ability for self-reflection. Part of this self-reflection is enabled by the element of time – time in hospital with only himself and his thoughts. In addition, Horne finds enlightenment, of sorts, in his various drug-induced hallucinations:

> ... whatever it is they're giving me must also be mind-altering. A continuous stream of little ants, hundreds of them, runs, like a mobile dado, around the top of the walls. When I am talking to people we suddenly shift location: I am in a New York flat designed by Mondrian; I am in a nineteenth-century Russian mansion with a tented roof, painted scarlet, decorated with black maple-leaf shapes; I am in a Norwegian fishing village; I am in a West African cultural centre where, to the tune of 'The Teddy Bears' Picnic', they are singing, 'It's ethnic time

> for teddy bears.' ... although perhaps not significantly revelatory, [it] had, with a startling clarity, refreshed in me the art of attentive looking. (p. 80)

The 'art of attentive looking' is arguably a fitting description for many appropriations of the essay. Most certainly this personal essay of Horne's is an endeavour into the art of attentive looking. While this text can be situated within other larger narrative structures, including theories of the body, cultural theory, and history,[11] Horne always returns to look closely at the detail, of his own life and the world around him. This is an attempt, it would seem, to render that 'clarity' of vision about which he speaks for his reader.

This can be seen where, for example, Horne endows the experiences of the elderly with the lucidity of first hand experience:

> I have accommodated myself with the fact that I "look old". And I even showed tolerant indifference to the woman who, walking on the wrong side of the pavement, when she bumped into me said, "You silly old fool" (p. 81).

It is a telling story, because having read his essay thus far, we know that Horne is far from silly, and he is certainly no fool. We know that Horne's physical appearance and medical afflictions do not render his mind deficient. Indeed, he reveals that the ageing of his body has rather inadvertently enabled him, by the very act of having to slow down, to 'take an intelligent interest in enforced slow walking – comparing the degree of slowness today with yesterday, examining the performance on a slope, contemplating the effect of heat and humidity' (p.81). Despite his aged body, his mind is nimble, and he is able to reflect on his body's 'performance'.

In his enforced, more leisurely state, 'standing still looking at street scenes "turning them into paintings"' (p. 81) Horne accepts that he may appear 'an old lost man', confessing that while scene-painting, he has been questioned by several people on just this point. But the act of self-reflection, of thinking, of challenging one's perceptions, is what keeps the mind young. Firstly, argues Horne, such aptitude and indeed attitude enables 'more perspectives from which to consider changed circumstances'

[11] This essay first appeared in the *Griffith Review: Making Perfect Bodies*, Winter 2004.

(p. 83), and moreover 'old people who have kept their wits, freed of the provincialism of the present, can know things other people don't know' (p.83).

The potential knowledge that comes with age, with the experience of life, also comes with an aged body. We might consider this natural order of things somewhat cruel, but Horne has not set out to paint himself as the victim. He has liberated himself, to some degree, from the failings of his body, through the fortune of a still bright mind, and the understanding of the importance of such a gift. Horne concludes his essay poignantly, with the reflections of another essayist, Cicero, when he writes:

> Among detailed musings on the possible satisfactions of old age, he [Cicero] said he could admire the old man who had something of the young man in him, but also the young man who had, within him, something of the old man. (p. 84)

Horne is not concerned with a rhetorical approach centred on logos, on the logical development of an argument. He is concerned, rather, with the development of the narrative of his essay as it relates to his experience of his, and other people's, bodies, in his lifetime. In this sense we are made privy to the story of the body, as seen by Horne. This is where the persuasive force lies, for it is Horne's story. Thus we have ethos (Horne has constructed himself as an authority over his subject by the personal approach) and narrative (a convincing story, because it is story-like) acting as the rhetorical modes.

While it is true that Horne's writing diverts to the more analytical at times, its story-like narrative structure shows this essay to be a text in which the preferred readerly stance can be seen, in Rosenblatt's terms, to be aesthetic. There is, for the reader, immediate pleasure to be had in the experience of Horne's language use, in his evocative revelations. Horne's clear presence in this essay, both in his use of the authorial 'I', and in the experiences he relates, makes this an intimate piece of writing. It is a transaction, a conversation between writer and reader. The reader is drawn into Horne's essay by his use of stories, and fictional techniques, and becomes complicit in the production of the text by imagining the scenes, hearing the sounds, smelling the smells. Horne engages the imagination of his reader to great effect.

It can be considered, then, that the 'author and reader exist... as equals, in the "production" of the text' (Bensmaïa 1987, p. 56), and thus, in Bensmaïa's terms, the essay realises Barthes's 'readerly text'. By offering this essay in narrative form, ostensibly the hierarchies of meaning and understanding are dissolved because the text does not contain 'predetermined meanings', but rather is one 'intended to produce effects' (p. 59). I would certainly argue that Horne's structure and approach in this essay, combined with his use of language, entice the reader to become part of the text, and thus, to become a co-creator in the story. These personal experiences also invite the reader to remember his/her own such experiences, and indeed ponder his/her understanding of the body, mind and the ageing process.

This apparent dissolution of the hierarchies does not, however, render the reader's choice of stance or understanding arbitrary. For example, the factual elements of Horne's essay give his story credibility. The body is in this essay undeniably a medical entity because the hospital, surgery, kidney bowl, GP, surgeon, scrubbed lino floors, stainless steel, anaesthetic, oxygen, CAT scan, bandages, medications, and nurses; not to mention the wheezing, congested lungs, broken bones, lacerated face, temperatures, bruising, cancer, heart fibrillations, 'laryngeal spasm', temporary blindness, hallucinations, and atrophy; all make it difficult to argue otherwise.

The reader is not, however, bombarded by this 'list'; Horne's style is more graceful. Thus he does not just receive oxygen while choking to death as his larynx spasms –

> There are voices. Hands touch me. There is the friendly whisper of oxygen. Later, when I come to back in my room, they tell me I had a 'laryngeal spasm', a sudden closing of the larynx that can kill if it keeps the windpipe blocked but can also relax the body, including the larynx, allowing breathing to come back. (p. 79)

The first two short sentences create immediacy and panic, the third slightly longer sentence relieves this panic, the tone is softer, the 'whisper' whispers. The fourth sentence, a much longer description, changes tone again; it is factual, rising to the dramatics of a life and death situation, only to be brought back down by way of the

situation's rather banal capacity to self-rectify. The medical vocabulary is cleverly woven into the story so that the consequences of meaning are seen as powerful and significant, yet the effect is seemingly subtle. This is also true of the vocabulary of the body, and that of the mind. And it is just such an approach that enables the reader to enter the text with both a sense of 'aesthetic' fulfilment and an equality of interaction.

In my categorisation of the essays in *The Best Australian Essays*, this text was an exemplary personal essay. Horne effectively uses the personal and the intimate. In his examination of his life experiences, knowledge and understanding, he both tells a story and simultaneously critiques the follies of our cultural 'influences' in relation to the mind, body and age. This essay is closely focussed on the nominal subject (mind, body and age, and Horne), but it looks outwards as to the location of these subjects within the broader discourse communities in which they are located. Our interpretation of the subject and the relevant communities are then mediated, as Anderson (1991) notes, by the persona Horne adopts. This persona is revealed in the text through the stories told, attitudes adopted, and language used. We are thus prompted to read Horne as a graceful, highly intelligent, yet fiery, writerly persona all of which are admirable characteristics that serve to build a likable and trustworthy narrator.

In the understanding of the essay genre code presented in this thesis, Horne's essay is perhaps the closest of all, in *The Best Australian Essays* collection, to what Lukács or Adorno might have considered a 'utopian' example of the form. It is an essay centred on life experience, but one with broader social and cultural implications. Horne challenges our dominant views of our own bodies, minds and the ageing process, and that of others. But Horne, in adopting a personal stance, carefully refrains from a closed or fixed understanding. The reader must decide.

Literary Reportage

For the purposes of this analysis, literary reportage is located somewhere between the personal essay and criticism, in terms of its form, style and subject matter. These kinds of essays focus on communities and events in a way that utilises rhetorical and research techniques such as those associated with ethnography. The essayist here can be seen as a participant observer, a person on the ground, documenting the community and world in which he is immersed. As such, these texts describe in great detail scenes and surroundings, enabling the reader to form a mental picture of an event or location. Characters are similarly revealed through description of both physical attributes and ideological positions, and also, through dialogue and actions. We can further see in these essays, as with personal essays, the use of other 'fictional' techniques, particularly those of story and plot.

What is interesting about the category of literary reportage, in comparison to the personal essay, is the voice of the essayist. Even though the personal 'I' is sometimes used, these essays are not personal accounts. In literary reportage the focus of the essay is on the event and the discourse communities represented. The narrator is therefore positioned as external to the subject, not internal – as with the personal essay. This serves to distance the essayist from the reader, and similarly distance the essayist as a subject matter. Yet there can be an intimate appeal about this form of the essay. The reader, for example, might be made to feel as if she is being made privy to some kind of private world. He can be positioned, therefore, in such a way as to develop a deeper understanding and empathy towards 'other' individuals, events, and communities. Similarly, a reader may identify with the subject of the text. The essayist here is the storyteller, but not the story. And ultimately, in having a particular event and a particular community revealed to them, readers are able to gain an insight into the literary/cultural/historical nature of the world in which we live.

In the following table we can see the elements of Swales's (1990) definitional cluster approach utilised for determining instances of the literary reportage sub-genre in *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies.

Purpose	**Form**
- examination of community/event - reveal stories which are often hidden/ignored - analysis of community/event - open	- use of participant observation - fictional techniques
	Structure - pathos and story to persuade - narrative structure can be varied (by time, themes, events etc)
	Reader expectation - to be made privy to experiences of other communities - descriptive, factual and to some degree analytical - literary/aesthetic quality

Table 2 Overview of 'literary reportage' using Swales's (1996) definitional cluster approach

The occurrence of the elements outlined above, and, similarly, broader theories of the essay form and literary texts, within an exemplar of literary reportage, are examined in the following analysis of Craig Sherborne's essay 'Tainted Love'.

Literary reportage: 'Tainted Love' by Craig Sherborne, *The Best Australian Essays 2001*, pp. 387-395

In this essay Sherborne takes the reader on a journey through a day in the life of divorce lawyer Paul Stephanev. By employing the techniques of participant observation, associated with literary reportage, Sherborne is able to 'look attentively' (to borrow Horne's 2004 phrase) at the character of Stephanev, the people he represents, the systems within which he works, and the issues and emotions involved in the process of divorce.

This essay begins with an introduction to Stephanev: the reader meets this central character as he, in turn, meets a new client – the reader and client are, therefore, introduced to Stephanev at the same time. This signals to the reader that, via the narrative, she will also become a 'participant observer', and complicit in the text as a witness to an otherwise closed situation. The introduction begins:

> Stephanev, forty-something, slightly stooped, wearing thick-weaved grey suits and red-rimmed spectacles, thrusts his hand out as he walks towards them, shakes firmly, then ushers them, his arm behind their back, barn-dance fashion, into a small conference room with a round table. (p. 387)

With the introductions complete, Sherborne propels the reader into Stephanev's day. It is 8.45am, we are told, and 'Stephanev is walking a client to court, a middle-aged retiree, Theo'. Theo's marriage has 'crashed', and the estranged couple are now 'at war' over money (p. 387). Theo, pathetic and disempowered, is in need of a saviour: enter Stephanev. Stephanev, thus rendered as the hero, as the "good guy" is therefore also a likable character. The positioning of Stephanev in this way is continued when we learn that he has worked Pro Bono cases, petitioned for Aboriginal rights, and spent time as an HIV/AIDS advocate. He even has an 'irk' for 'slack lawyers'.

Theo's day in court is detailed in this essay in much the same way as a fictional narrator might retell a scene in a story: 'Theo is wearing a dowdy sports jacket and op-shop tie in the hope of emphasising his financial decline', and Stephanev ushers him through 'the hoards of divorce-seekers grinding their marriage in their teeth' (p. 388). Sherborne shows the awkwardness of this situation and the tension felt by Theo. This stands in contrast to the ease and professionalism of his legal representative. Sherborne writes:

> Theo's mouth is chewing air; he says he needs a glass of water, he needs to relax. Stephanev reminds him that this is nothing, that he is in for a long day: 'There'll be lots of time for reading newspapers and drinking coffee. All I want you to do is be bright-eyed and bushy tailed, and be prepared to think laterally.' Theo lowers his eyes for a moment, as if pondering what 'think laterally' might actually entail. Stephanev takes a step closer to him, tips forward slightly on his toes and smiles in a reassuring gesture.

Sherborne doesn't tell his readers about the characters, but rather he *shows* them in action, the scenes unfold for the reader, who is drawn in, and made privy to the lives of, in this case, Theo and Stephanev.

As with most ethnographic writing, there is a bigger story at work here. This is not just Theo's story, nor is it Stephanev's. The larger narrative to be examined and understood is the narrative of *divorce*. Having immersed the reader in the very 'real' scenario of Theo's experience, and Stephanev's role in this process, Sherborne sets out a brief factual analysis of divorce in Australia:

> There are about 50,000 divorces granted in Australia each year – 46 per cent of all marriages end in divorce – and most are managed without a court fight. Of those that do go to court 95 per cent are settled long before they get to trial. The protracted nature of the process – it can take eighteen months from start to finish – tires, bores, financially drains, intimidates and embarrasses people into reaching an agreement quickly. (p. 389)

Structurally and stylistically, this briefing strays from Sherborne's usual, more fictional, approach. Rhetorically, it highlights the broader aspects and consequences of divorce in this country, and also serves to clarify Stephanev's role as a divorce lawyer – he is an advisor, mediator, and counsellor. This clarification calls into question the negative and prevailing narrative about divorce lawyers, suggesting rather that the profession, and the 'system', provide a necessary function:

> Like it or loathe it, it's a system that gets results according to Stephanev: 'People come to court and it's like a reality check. They want all this behind them.' (p. 389)

The character of Stephanev is used, therefore, to scaffold the enthymeme of Sherborne's text: that divorce lawyers, though often denounced, are a necessary part of a complex and problematic social issue.

Sherborne's essay moves between the intimate details of Theo's break up, and the broader, more universal, story of divorce. Sherborne signals in this essay the ties between one marriage breakdown and many – Theo's is one divorce in 50,000. While the movement between personal and generic detail shows the broader cultural significance of Theo's story, it is also a tool through which the portrait of Stephanev can be sustained and refined. This is evident in the following:

> Stephanev has thirty or forty divorce cases on his books at any one time. He considers each to be 'unique'. His favourite saying is Tolstoy's, 'All happy families resemble each other; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' (p. 389)

The general details about Stephanev's caseload reinforce the validity of his profession; while snippets of personal information, and Stephanev's philosophy on the cause/s of divorce, build Sherborne's enthymeme.

As Stephanev's day progresses, so too does Sherbourne's narrative. Having examined the processes and practicalities of Stephanev's work, the essay returns to the story of Theo, and in so doing, moves from a logos-centred approach to one of narrative persuasion. We find Stephanev and Theo in a 'coffee shop outside the court', a place Stephanev calls 'Settler's Café'. Sherborne's style becomes more fictional again; he describes the events, the character's actions, he shows the scene through dialogue:

> Donna takes out a writing pad and begins a steady stream of blue longhand. 'I'm going to draw up our wish list,' she says. Theo pounces on this: 'Can you wish her to go to Korea? Chechnya?' Stephanev allows himself an amused chuckle... Theo, meanwhile, is fidgeting, wife-staring and picking up and putting down his mobile phone as if it's a lucky charm. Perceiving that some levity is needed for Theo's sake, Stephanev tells him a typical divorce lawyer anecdote... (p. 390)

Donna is Theo's barrister, Stephanev his solicitor. In this scene, as in the others in which she appears, she is the one working busily in the background. Stephanev is, by contrast, the presiding overseer. He is always there, managing the events, stepping in when required; he is the person in charge, in control of the situation. We can understand this to be a vital role, particularly when Sherborne renders so clearly the hurt and tension with which Theo is consumed. Stephanev is Theo's proverbial rock. But more than this, he is the consummate professional and thoroughly human – he 'allows' himself to chuckle, he perceives Theo's unease. Sherborne's enthymeme builds potency.

The final paragraph on page 391 begins 'There is one noticeable contradiction about Stephanev.' Sherborne has already highlighted a number of contradictions about this

man, albeit contradictions in stereotypes rather than internal to the individual. Yet both continue to build the rhetorical strategy which underpins this essay. Stephanev is

> elegantly turned-out, his slim wrists protruding from stiff French cuffs that are fastened with unobtrusive though expensive-looking links. His Rolex is a white-faced, unchunky thing of style. But his briefcase ... it's hardly a briefcase at all. It's a cheap, nylon souvenir from a Pro Bono conference and has the words 'For The Public Good' stamped on it. (p. 391)

There is, we learn, an ostensible danger in the practice of divorce law, even for the heroic, ethical lawyer. This danger is part of the reason, Sherborne reveals, that he can only provide 'peripheral' personal details about Stephanev – anything that might lead anyone to Stephanev's 'door' is 'off limits'. Such revelations signal to the reader where this textual journey will and will not go. In drawing attention to the act of writing, its restrictions and problems, Sherborne seeks to make the reader and himself co-conspirators in the process of understanding and unravelling Stephanev. If nothing else, we might read that the occupation of divorce lawyer has many facets, including being both exciting and dangerous.

Sherborne uses the professional dangers facing Stephanev to draw attention to the previously intimated dominant discourse surrounding this arm of the law: 'Other branches of the legal profession knock divorce lawyers, rib them for working in an area that lacks 'history' and 'gravitas'... But they can't knock the divorce lawyer's courage' (p. 393).

When next Stephanev is in court, however, the narrative shifts away from Theo's divorce; Stephanev is now representing a child. When Sherborne writes, 'Financial disputes can be heated, bitterly fought out, but when offspring are at stake, a very piece of a person's own self, raging emotional fires turn civility to ashes' (p. 393), he sustains the enthymeme and shows the 'courage' required by professionals such as Stephanev. Again:

> In criminal courts, defendants can have a pathetic nullity about them; they are listlessly resigned to their fate, shuffling outside for a sulky cigarette. But in divorce courts, where strictly speaking there are no defendants, though people are

> defending their very hearts and souls, combatants seethe wide-eyed with energy and raised-voiced purpose. (p. 393)

We can see Sherborne employing metaphor in his 'raging emotional fires', to intensify our awareness of the emotive nature of this subject, and certainly to imbue his writing with a degree of aesthetic pleasure. Sherbourne utilises description, and in particular, neologisms, as tools to set the scene, build the moment, the characters, to add 'literariness'. These neologisms are for the most part 'nonce compounds' (Kane 1988) and they add, with varying degrees of effect, originality to Sherborne's writing, for example: *getting-to-know-you moments, barn-dance fashion, wife-staring, raised-voiced purpose, pin-striped seriousness, rubbing-her-hands-together way, legal-bills-versus-end-result sums, world-weary, looking-at-each-other terms, prickly-tempered.* And then the less original: *divorce-seekers, turned-out, forty-something, expensive-looking, money-grubbing, blue-chip job, shop-front lawyer, super-cool student.*

The use of nonce compounds in this essay is excessive, and becomes a recognisable feature of the writing. While adding a degree of originality and intensifying awareness, it also adds a sense of casual conversation to Sherborne's writing style. This drives his tidal-like approach, which draws the reader into the story, and then pushes her out of the intimate into the broader, factual, more universal concerns that scaffold the argument. The latter here can be seen as the logical (logos) component of Sherborne's argument, the former relies on narrative persuasion (Hesse 1989).

However, the large number of nonce compounds in this essay can seem, at times, an overused technique. The casualness of this style can appear to be, in fact, *too* casual, particularly with the longer compound structures such as *rubbing-her-hands-together way* and *looking-at-each-other terms*. Where *pin-striped seriousness* and *raised-voiced purpose* read as clever and droll, the former compounds by comparison do not. This is problematic because in questioning Sherborne's word choice – that is, 'Could he have chosen better?' – the reader is drawn to the technical aspect of the writing process at the very point in the essay which might otherwise signal, in Rosenblatt's terms, an aesthetic reading response.

Sherborne's role within the text is an interesting one. While he uses a number of techniques, particularly fictional, to converse with the reader, to make her an active player in the text, he is not a character or subject of the text *per se*. Sherborne never presents himself in terms of the authorial 'I'. He is present only at those moments in which he reveals the writerly process (information about Stephanev that is off limits, for example). Sherborne does not write about himself at all in relation to the subject matter. Thus while the reader is implored to become something of a co-conspirator in Sherborne's participant observation, trying to understand the characters of this essay and the situations within which they find themselves, there is a deliberate separation between the author and the subject. This allows for a smoothness of transition between the fictional and the factual style utilised by Sherborne, because though the tone and approach to language might change, the third person narration ultimately remains – writer and reader, together, are looking through a proverbial window into another world.

This point highlights Anderson's (1991) notion that a reader's interpretation of a particular community is dependent on the language and experiences the writerly persona makes available. The view, through Sherborne's writerly persona (seen in the choice of language, tone, experiences and actions revealed, issues discussed and so on), gives the reader an insight into the discourse community of divorce, and challenges common perceptions about particular members within that community. Sherborne's view of divorce is not pejorative, as such, in this essay. In many ways his stance suggests an acceptance of the reality of divorce. But one can read that there is a deep concern for the victims of failed relationships, and indeed that there are many such victims.

In terms of persuasive technique, Sherborne can be seen to employ all of the elements of rhetoric, including Hesse's fourth mode, narrative. We see the logos-centred development of the enthymeme in the factual details, and the chronological structure of the essay; there exists an element of pathos for the character of Theo and therefore all victims (and they are positioned as such) of the divorce process; and ethos is

utilised as a persuasive tool in the trustworthy nature of Sherborne's narration (he shows us what he sees, tell us what he can and cannot reveal), and also that of his main character (he is a trustworthy and likable person *and* lawyer). Finally, the reader is likely to be persuaded of the validity of Sherborne's enthymeme and the characters and situations he seeks to represent, because of the fictional, story-like techniques he uses to *show* his characters *in action*.

The dance between more literary and more common reportage styles serves Sherborne's subject matter well. Because it is one that offers up local stories, he is able to utilise an aesthetic narrative to reveal the intimate details of Theo's case, and of Stephanev the lawyer. Conversely, the fact that the larger subject matter of this essay, divorce, has such a profound impact on Australian society, lends, although does not restrict, itself to a more factual analysis implying, at least in part, an efferent reading.

Ultimately, we might consider that Sherborne approaches the essay form in a postmodern way rejecting any apparent grand narrative: of lawyers, divorce or the essay genre more broadly. He utilises a literary and rhetorical approach that is varied, and which serves the subject matter in its multiplicity of forms. Sherborne arrives at no definitive conclusions about his subject matter, except perhaps that there is always more to be considered and understood about divorce in this country, a process that is necessarily continual because while the human condition is universal, each person's situation, as Stephanev tells us, is 'unique'.

Politically radical essays

There are only three essays that fall into this 'cluster' in *The Best Australian Essays* collections. Considering Kirklighter's discussions of the politically radical essay (as one divergent from dominant white/western/privilege), and Davis's (1999) critique of Australia's essay coterie (whereby the 'usual suspects' speak *for* the silenced), it must be noted that the politically radical essays we see in *The Best Australian Essays* fit Davis's notion more closely than they do that of Kirklighter (2002). Yet while we see in these examples white, male, western-privilege, speaking for others, these writers are presenting stories to the public that are either not being told at all; or are, but in vastly different terms. There are two central themes presented in these essays: an apology to the stolen generation, and the plight of refugees seeking asylum in Australia.

The politically radical essays in *The Best Australian Essays* seek to examine subjects that at the time of publication were both timely and topical. The political implications of both the apology to the stolen generations, and the plight of refugees in Australia, have both national and international significance. For the most part, neither members of the stolen generation nor refugees have been given the forums in which to tell their stories in the mainstream media; as such these essays represent one person speaking for a community, or communities, to which they do not belong. However, these essays do seek to question the dominant hegemonies circulating through the mainstream press, and serve to highlight the narratives of the silenced 'other'.

What we might then consider as 'radical' in these texts is the means by which the stories seek to persuade. Kirklighter's (2002) examination of the Latino/a essay provides some insights for this purpose, as the discussions in the previous chapter show. For her, the form of politically radical is 'self-reflexive', 'spontaneous' and 'sincere' (p. 74). While sincerity and self-reflexivity are somewhat tangible characteristics that can be measured through language, style, approach to the topic/subject, and ideological position, the notion of 'spontaneous' is relatively more complex and subjective. What constitutes spontaneous might then be considered in two ways, in this context: spontaneous as in unstructured, and spontaneous in the

impulsive sense as an urgent need to write. In many ways we might consider that these two facets are inextricably linked.

Let us consider how the spontaneous, as unstructured, reveals itself in the essay text. The spontaneous/unstructured essay is not without structure or meaning, but rather reflects that kind of ordering which Heilker describes as 'chrono-logic ordering' (1996, p. 23). This kind of 'unstructured' approach utilises free writing or thought demonstrating the cognitive process in action. In this regard, the essay is not actually unstructured, rather, it is *differently* structured. The notion of impulse thus lends itself to such a form of textual structure if we consider this spontaneity as an immediate and pressing desire to write.

We see chrono-logic ordering evident in one of the politically radical essays in *The Best Australian Essays*; this same essay also uses the personal as an authorising force. The two other essays of this type, in contrast, utilise parody. Parody functions in these essays as a kind of fictional story (akin to a 'what-if' scenario) which seeks to persuade through the evocation of Hesse's fourth rhetorical mode, narrative. Furthermore, the parody seems to magnify the potential for persuasion via ethos and pathos. As such these essays are highly emotive, centred on personal experience (though not always that of the essayist) and are strongly linked to an ideological position.

The following table details the elements used to determine exemplars of the politically radical essay sub-genre in *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies.

Purpose	Form
- examination of timely/topical cultural events/circumstances which can be seen to have significant and demonstrable political implications - reveal stories which are often hidden/ignored - questioning of dominant hegemonies	- often personal – the 'I' acts as an authority in the text - parody - fictional techniques
	Structure - ethos, pathos and story to persuade - chrono-logic ordering
	Reader expectation - emotive, personal, analytical - descriptive and factual - overtly linked to ideological position

Table 3 Overview of the 'politically radical essay' using Swales's (1996) definitional cluster approach

The occurrence and effect of these elements, on both a macro and micro level, are examined in the following analysis of Robert Manne's essay 'Exclusionary Nationalism'.

Politically radical essay: 'Exclusionary Nationalism' by Robert Manne, *The Best Australian Essays 2001*, pp. 54-62

This essay is a composite of a three smaller 'columns' that were published in *The Age* in August, September and October of 2001. While each of these columns, or mini-essays, can and did stand alone, as a direct challenge to particular events and government policy in late 2001, together they also form what one might conceive as a politically radical appropriation of the essay form. This politically radical form is perhaps most evident in the second essay entitled 'If Beazley Had Spoken for Australia', but as the three essays are presented together in this anthology, it is worthwhile to look at all the facets, both individual and collective, which this essay text represents.

The first 'mini-essay' within this essay is entitled 'Innocence Behind Bars'. It is a powerful and shocking piece, the subject of which was (in 2001) highly pertinent to the political climate in Australia. Manne positions his reader to feel shock and abhorrence, his key rhetorical tool here is pathos. In the first instance we are introduced to the character of Shayan who 'has been detained in Australia, with his

parents, for the past seventeen months'. Shayan, we are told, is six, and since his detention in Australia has become seriously ill. Manne writes:

> Shayan no longer talks or eats. During the days he sits listlessly; during the nights he barely sleeps. When he hears a disturbance at the centre, he curls up into a foetal position. Shayan is taken regularly to hospital for rehydration. When away at the hospital his condition improves slightly. As soon as he returns to Villawood, however, he reverts to his former state. The hospital where he is treated has diagnosed him as suffering from acute and chronic post-traumatic stress disorder. (p. 54)

This is a terribly tragic situation, yet Manne's writing is unemotional and to the point. He has not burdened the facts with description, and what is presented is minimal. There is a clinical approach to Shayan's situation, and it is a rhetorical strategy that serves Manne's subject well. Firstly, Manne is dealing with a person whose situation is in itself appalling; by utilising a writerly style which might be described as bare, he is ostensibly letting the subject speak for itself. No more description can make this situation more appalling than what it is; the implication, in this regard, is that the threshold has been reached. Manne, therefore, relies significantly on the reader to share his strength of feeling about the issue, a low risk strategy considering that the subject is an innocent child.

However, Shayan's situation becomes more complex, and Manne's writing more nuanced, in the text that follows. Shayan's parents have been given the choice, Manne writes, 'of keeping their child with them or sending him to strangers outside the detention centre'. This use of the noun 'strangers' is an affecting strategy here; and arguably Manne's enthymeme can be read that in this situation such choices are not really choices at all. For Shayan, leaving the detention centre to be cared for by others is to be cared for by strangers, people he does not know, regardless of the integrity of their intentions. This is a problematic scenario Manne informs us because

> Even if common sense were not enough to reveal the effect of the loss of parents on a profoundly traumatised six year old, there exists a detailed psychological literature on the devastating impact of such separation on the very young. (p. 54)

Again, the adjectives 'profoundly' and 'devastating' imbue Manne's writing with pathos – this is an unacceptable alternative; but 'On the other hand, at Villawood Shayan is experiencing a daily psychic death'. This is a gut-wrenching situation Manne has laid before his readers, and it is meant to be. It is meant to be because if we consider that Manne's enthymeme can be read as a lack of reasonable choice for Shayan's family, we are forced to consider that there *is* an acceptable alternative, but that bureaucracy stands in the way. While we know that there are people with the power to remedy Shayan's situation, these same people are problematically bound to, and by, the ideologies that resulted in the establishment of institutions such as Villawood in the first place.

The Australian Government's policy with regard to refugees, asserts Manne

> Is not only to detain all asylum seekers but to detain them in conditions sufficiently unpleasant and uncertain as to dissuade others, in similar circumstances, from looking towards Australia as a place of refuge. (p. 55)

This policy, Manne explains, while morally vacant, exists and is legitimised because of 'bureaucratic rationality'. He asserts that the underlying ideology is that 'if required to choose between saving a child by bending the rules or maintaining the integrity of the system, it is the system and not the child that... [it] will defend' (p. 56). By preferencing Shayan's narrative over that of the bureaucracy, evident in language choice, dedicated space, and a pathos-driven argument, Manne is seeking to challenge both government policy, and community apathy. He is, therefore, also seeking to give a voice to those silenced, to tell the stories that they are prevented from telling themselves. The desperation of this situation runs through this entire piece and is amplified by an equally desperate concluding line:

> Nonetheless, the responsible minister will not act; the opposition is silent; the popular media show no interest; and public opinion does not stir.' (p. 56)

The second of the smaller essays that make up 'Exclusionary Nationalism', is a rhetorically interesting piece entitled 'If Beazley Had Spoken for Australia'. This essay is framed as a speech which 'Opposition Leader Kim Beazley should, but will not

make' to the Australian Parliament; it is dated September 2001. The subject of the speech/this essay is a proposed bill to pass retrospective legislation in which 'certain Australian territories', namely Christmas Island and Ashmore Reef, would be excluded from Australia's migration zone. In simple terms, the purpose of the bill is to limit the opportunities for would-be asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat, to claim asylum by landing in these territories that are ostensibly easier to reach, in terms of proximity, and also, border security.

The 'Beazley speech' begins with a glance back at Australia's *Immigration Restriction Act*, passed in the Parliament in 1901, which, says Manne, was the 'basis for the White Australia Policy', a policy widely conceived as one of Australia's more regrettable ones, if for no other reason than its overt racism. In contemporary times it would seem that we prefer our prejudices delivered in a somewhat more subtle manner. Indeed, this can be read as Manne's enthymeme: that while the nomenclature and language of the White Australia Policy may have changed, essentially the principles of our current immigration policy remain the same.

Importantly, it must also be recognised that in writing this hypothetical speech for Beazley, Manne is calling into question the silence from opposing political parties on this issue.

Having drawn connections between the archaic, racist ideologies that underscored the White Australia Policy, and the proposed exclusions to Australia's migration zone, Manne then attempts to bestow on the refugees, demonised by the government, a sense of fragility, and humanity. He writes:

> Three years ago small numbers of boats began to arrive in Australia with refugees from two of the most vicious tyrannies on earth: Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Afghanistan under the Taliban... The government remained silent about the persecution the asylum seekers had suffered. The [Australian] people were informed that those seeking asylum were selfish and wealthy 'queue jumpers' stealing places from refugees genuinely in need. (p. 57)

Manne argues that such labels are demonising, and indeed false, because no such thing as a refugee queue exists. As he points out, there are several million people from Afghanistan and Iraq in refugee camps, and only 'a paltry 3,000 have been offered homes'. Furthermore, Manne argues, a 'queue is an orderly line with a predictable outcome' and such order and predictability does not exist in the 'real world' of refugees.

Manne is morally outraged at the government's stance, and is clearly suggesting that Beazley should be too. To further the enthymeme, Manne suggests that there is not just an ethical imperative here, but also a legal one: 'According to international conventions' he states 'harsh treatment of asylum seekers as a way of deterring others is prohibited.' This ethos-focused argument reiterates that Manne's position is not simply his own, but also that of the international community. The harsh treatment as an apparent means to effect deterrence is seen in the establishment of mandatory detention in centres often located in 'the most inhospitable regions' of Australia. Whilst this may be seen by some as an effective mechanism for deterring refugees from heading for our shores, it has also resulted, Manne asserts, in 'pandemics of grave psychiatric illness' within these facilities.

Manne, again employing ethos, tells us that the British High Court found mandatory detention of asylum seekers unlawful in that country, one whose system of government is so closely linked to our own. In Australia, conversely, we detain refugees for 'years', and 'not only men but also women and children'.

The rationale behind the Howard government's proposed amendment is a reaction to the boatloads of people arriving on Australian shores in 2001, and more tellingly the event that saw 'for the first time in our history Australia... [prevent] a boatload [of refugees] from setting foot on our shore.' The result of this, according to Manne, was that Australia was seen to be treating Indonesia, 'a poverty-stricken country,' as a 'refugee dumping ground' which helped to 'resuscitate' the world-wide opinion and 'ancient stereotype' of Australia as a 'selfish, wealthy and racist' country.

Following on from this, Manne questions what it is that the

> government intends to do when boats begin to arrive on other northern shores... will Australia become the first country to renounce the obligations it has undertaken as a signatory to the UN convention on refugees? (p. 58)

Little did Manne know in 2001 that five years later the same government would introduce a bill into Parliament that, opposition parties claim, effectively excises mainland Australia from the migration zone, as far as refugee arrivals are concerned. This bill proposes that all refugees claiming asylum in Australia are processed off-shore, in places such as Nauru.

Manne's conclusion to his speech for Kim Beazley reads

> In administrative terms the new Howard policy makes little sense. In diplomatic terms it has done serious damage to relations with Indonesia and to Australia's good name. In political terms it has unleashed the ugliest episode of anti-refugee and anti-Muslim sentiment this country has experienced for many years... In moral terms, in driving from our shore some of the most miserable and desperate people on earth, the policy is a matter for shame. (p. 59)

Rhetorically, Manne's speech for Beazley utilises a pathos- and ethos-centred approach. The reader is called upon to feel empathy for the 'most miserable and desperate people on earth', and to also see the backlash against the government's policy from its international allies. What makes this essay 'politically radical', however, is not just the argument or the language choices Manne makes, but the premise that this is a speech which should have been delivered by the Opposition Leader Kim Beazley, in Parliament, in September of 2001. The reality is not only that he did *not* deliver this speech, but that the speech which he *did* deliver was both ideologically and rhetorically disparate from Manne's.

This strategy of challenging what people do and say (or do not do and say) by 'speaking' for them, is both mischievous and edifying – there is a playfulness which has the effect of highlighting the perceived silences and inadequacies of a particular subject matter. This mischief is appealing to readers; it takes some of the edge off of the seriousness of the issue, but simultaneously, by pairing two essentially conflicting

subject matters, emphasises with greater clarity the actuality of what is at stake. A similar tactic was used by satirist John Clarke, for example, when he recruited John Howard, a well known Australia actor with the same name as the Prime Minister, to deliver an apology to the Aboriginal people on behalf of Australia (an apology which the Prime Minister had refused to give), as part of the comedy series *The Games*, aired on ABC television.[12]

The final of the mini-essays in this parent text is a piece entitled 'Victory Without Honour', in which Manne's theme of 'exclusionary nationalism' continues and is concluded – ultimately with a victory for the government of the day. This essay was written five weeks before the 2001 Federal election, and the prediction made by Manne in the second sentence of the opening paragraph, that the coalition would remain in power, proved to be accurate. In the following paragraph, Manne gives the reason for which his prophecy bears consideration, namely, that the government introduced a number of policy decisions/refinements which showed that it was listening to the Australian people. By implication, however, Manne sees these as trivial. The government, he argues, had something much bigger and much more sinister afoot. He writes:

> Since 1996, in general with popular approval, the Howard government has been steadily unravelling the cultural cloth the Keating government had woven. Already by the Centenary of Federation celebrations, it had largely disengaged from Asia, buried the multicultural debate, killed off prospects of a republic and allowed the hopes for Aboriginal reconciliation to fade. Yet still, in the cultural area, at this time it had not yet delivered the populist king hit.
>
> In late August an opportunity presented itself. The government forbade a Norwegian cargo ship, with rescued Afghan asylum seekers on board, from landing in Australia. (pp. 59-60)

Manne suggests that this was Howard's 'Churchillian moment'. It was an act Manne states as being at once both 'indecent' and 'brilliantly effective'. The reader is left with little doubt as to Manne's view of the Howard government. The negative association with verbs such as 'unravelling', 'disengaged', 'buried', and 'killed off' see Manne

[12] This apology appears in *Best Australian Essays 2000*, pp. 160-161.

frame the government's actions in a very specific way. While he concedes that these actions had popular approval, the implied *personal* disapproval evident in Manne's language choice questions these actions, and indeed the reliability of popular opinion.

That the *Tampa* incident, the turning back of a Norwegian ship carrying refugees, simultaneously dirtied Australia's international reputation and boosted Howard's popularity locally, is, suggests Manne, a 'shameful triumph'.

Despite the contemporary nature of these incidents, Manne turns his gaze to Australia's history as a means of analysing and explaining the issues at stake. This 'more historical explanation for the recent turn of events' serves two purposes: it draws attention to the broader political issues at play within Australia, contextualising them and providing clarity, and it also draws attention to Manne's expertise – he is a Professor of Politics and History at La Trobe University. This logos- and ethos-driven rhetorical strategy is therefore quite effective in locating his position and ideology as being well informed and logical.

According to Manne there are two 'policy foundations' on which the framework of Australia has traditionally, at least prior to the 1960s, been built. One of these had to do with economics, the other with population control. It is this latter point which is highly pertinent. Manne argues that in Australia

> A regime of exclusionary nationalism pre-vailed [sic]. The small British settler population was obsessed by fears of cultural swamping, of alien invasion from the north. The White Australia policy was the result. (p. 61)

Despite the overturning of the White Australia policy in the 1960s, the fears of 'swamping', 'invasions' and 'aliens' continued. Though 'assimilation' was replaced by multiculturalism, in which, in theory at least, all cultures within society can co-exist harmoniously, Manne argues that these cultural shifts, combined with a move towards a less protected and more globalised economy, 'lacked... broad popular support'. For Manne, the opposing political parties could have both benefited from this scenario –

Labor on the economic front and the Liberals on the issue of population. He believes it was the latter who took their opportunity. He writes

> For several years John Howard's Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock, had systematically denigrated the boat people fleeing from the Middle East, as queue jumpers at best and as terrorists at worst. By so doing, an atmosphere was gradually created around the refugee issue that the government could, when appropriate, readily orchestrate... in the pre-election period, over the *Tampa*, John Howard seized the opportunity with considerable enthusiasm and skill. (p. 62)

The '*Tampa* incident' set off 'the ugliest anti-multicultural, anti-Muslim and anti-refugee explosion Australia has ever seen'.

We see here similarities with the previous essay. At the beginning of this piece Manne suggests that the policy decisions and refinements made by the government in the lead-up to the election enabled it to appear to be listening to the populus. By contrast he suggests that in creating this appearance, it ceased to look 'mean and tricky'. Arguably Manne's enthymeme in this piece suggests that this was not the case, but rather that these mean and tricky traits still drive the government's actions. The development of this argument is clever; whilst implying that Howard's regime is mean and tricky, he never labels it as such, nor does he label individual ministers in this way. Rather, their actions are read as politically astute (tricky), though morally bankrupt (mean). And indeed the Opposition is painted as morally bankrupt also, and more damningly, as politically remiss. Though the government may be seen in this essay as being strategic and clever, this perception is constantly underscored by Manne's view that its actions and policies constitute indecent and inhumane behaviour.

All three traditional components of rhetoric, namely logos, pathos and ethos, infiltrate this piece. There is a logical development in Manne's argument, particularly in the historical perspective he gives to the issues at hand, and the telling of how and why the government has acted in the way it has. This historical perspective, along with Manne's own reputation as an academic and public intellectual/political commentator, reveals at least an implied ethos; and although we do not see the same strength of language in reference to the refugees in this as in the previous essay, we do

know that in the very least the government's position is viewed as 'shameful' and 'indecent'.

Thus far Manne's essay 'Exclusionary Nationalism' has been considered in terms of the three smaller, original texts which comprise the whole. This has been a useful means of analysis because each of the individual texts can be read as holding their own enthymeme and their own rhetorical strategies. However, it is also necessary to look at how these essays sit together forming a new text. The theme of the Howard Government's treatment of refugees, as presented by the media, and formalised through its policies, weaves these essays together. The reader is given three very different narratives: one personal (albeit in the third person) and local; one which delineates what an alternative position to Howard's might look like, and one which provides a broader historical/political analysis which in turn maps the development and implementation of Australia's stance in 2001 on refugees and immigration.

Manne's essay does not necessarily fit into what might be considered a typical example of the sub-genre of the 'politically radical' essay, as discussed in Chapter 5. Manne is a white, middle-class male; he is an academic and well-known public intellectual. He is not a silenced or marginalised member of the community. Nor does he use his own personal experience as an authorising mechanism in his text. What we might then consider politically radical about Manne's essay is the subject matter and, in the instance of 'If Beazley Had Spoken for Australia', his rhetorical approach. In taking the plight of refugees in Australia and seeking to problematise the current political stance on this issue, Manne is attempting to give a voice to those who at the time had literally little or no means by which their stories could be told.

Rhetorically, by positioning one of his essays as a speech which should be delivered in Parliament by the Leader of the Opposition, Manne is contextualising this text in a very specific way, shifting the ways in which it might be understood. Such an approach not only questions the government's position, but also that of the opposition, and by so doing invites the reader to examine more deeply the range of issues at stake – personal, local, national and international. In this sense we can

consider that Manne has set out to challenge the dominant voices and discourses on the issues of refugees and Australia's immigration policies.

Arguably, at least at the time of original publication, Manne's texts call for a largely efferent readerly stance. This is perhaps most evident in the repetition of his theme in the three essays over the months leading up to the Federal election in 2001. Ostensibly Manne is imploring the reader to consider his stance, in part at least, as to how it will impact on his/her vote in the (then) forthcoming election, although Manne implies that the alternative to Howard is, in reality, not much of an alternative at all. When considering a lack of alternative voice in government, there is a rather sad irony about the notion of democracy in this country, a notion which, at least in the discourse of the then government, is apparently so appealing to asylum seekers.

Critical essay

The essays in this category are those that seemed to be structured mostly, or at least substantially, around the process of critiquing literature, history and/or cultural products/conditions/communities and so on. Thus these essays are quite specifically topic oriented.

In *The Best Australian Essays*, a large proportion of the essays in this category do not employ the use of the personal 'I'. Where it is utilised, it appears far more sparingly than in other essay types in the collections. Overall, the critical essays take on more formal attributes. They use logos – reason and logic, supported by research, other texts, and other 'informed' opinion. Ethos also plays a significant role in these essays. Arguably, here the ethos of the essayists can be seen to be more about reputation – the public space which they occupy as authors and intellectuals – rather than a writerly persona, apparent in the text, which seeks to appeal to the reader on a more personal level.

The notion of 'informed' is a significant one to this category of essays, in the sense that the work seeks to imbue both an informed/informative text and an informed writer. These are related and yet distinct qualities. The informed/informative text is specific, in its most immediate sense, to the essay itself – to the style, structure, and veracity of the work. The informed essayist, as considered here, is evident both within the text (by the nature of the work) and what we might conclude therefore about its author, *and* by the status of the essayist as public intellectual outside of the text.

To some degree the status of the public intellectual as informed writer is specific to the discourse community within which he/she operates. Students of history and Australian politics, history buffs and scholars will be familiar with the work of Robert Manne, for example. Yet we can see that essayists such as Robert Manne, Drusilla Modjeska, Pierre Ryckmans, Raimond Gaita, Gideon Haigh, Nicholas Shakespeare, Don Watson, and Inga Clendinnen, to name but a few, occupy enough of the national

press (newspapers, television and books) to stake a claim as an intellectual in the public sense. This status has the potential to act as a rhetorical device within the essay, pointing to a further 'informed' body of work beyond the essay text in question. This notion is given further legitimacy in *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies which all contain a section entitled 'Notes on Contributors', these serve as a kind of mini career/publication synopsis. This in itself can be read as an act to advance the legitimacy/validity of the essayist and his/her inclusion in *The Best Australian Essays* anthology. This discussion of the public intellectual is important to the category of 'critical essay' because this is the largest of the essay categories in *The Best Australian Essays* and as such is the kind of essay most predominantly written/published by known Australian intellectuals.

The critical essays appearing in *The Best Australian Essays,* while predominantly driven rhetorically by logos and ethos, utilise various narrative structures and approaches. Some, though as noted not many, use the personal and the fictional techniques of story. Most use a thesis-support form whereby a premise is offered which is then, throughout the remainder of the text, proven to be valid. The latter kind of critical essay is most apparent under Craven's editorship. Notably, a significant number of these essays are concerned with government politics/policies. This changes under the editorial control of Dessaix, Modjeska and Marr, where the critical essays have a far more literary/cultural bent.

The following table represents the elements of Swales's (1990) definitional cluster approach utilised for determining typical instances of the critical essay sub-genre in *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies. It is important to reiterate, as the table shows, the potential for varied form in the critical essay category.

Purpose	Form
- to examine a literary/historical/cultural event - to inform/critique based on writer's expertise in field	- criticism of 'event' central to the text - factual, descriptive - can utilise various approaches (personal, literary, thesis-support)
	Structure - logos and ethos used to persuade - narrative structure can be varied
	Reader expectation - informative - high level reader/writer expertise - judgement based on expertise

Table 4 Overview of the 'critical essay' using Swales's (1996) definitional cluster approach

As suggested above, and in the introduction to this section, the close analysis of this sub-genre includes an examination of two individual essays: firstly, Richard Flanagan's 'The Rape of Tasmania', and secondly, Drusilla Modjeska's 'Dots on the Landscape'. By considering two critical essays, we are able to see how a difference in form and structure effect the text and its potential reading, while the purpose and reader expectation remain the same.

Critical essay I: 'The Rape of Tasmania' by Richard Flanagan, *The Best Australian Essays 2004*, pp. 183-194

Flanagan pulls no punches in this essay: the title and his opening statement set out his subject, tone and ideological position, leaving the reader with little doubt as to what kind of journey this essay will take. 'The Rape of Tasmania' begins: 'The written history of corruption in Tasmania goes like this'. It is an opening that serves to immediately alienate or embrace readers, and yet either way, there is something about the notion of a 'written history of corruption' that is both dramatic and intriguing. 'Gunns', 'profit', 'bribe', 'power', 'police', 'royal commission', 'imprisonment':[13] key words used forcefully to draw the reader into this contemporary Tasmanian thriller. Even those who may be ostracised by Flanagan's blatant ideology may be at least prepared to conceive that here 'fact' could be more interesting than fiction.

[13] Gunns Limited is 'Australia's largest integrated hardwood and softwood forest products company' (www.gunns.com.au). Gunns is most well known to the Australian public in the context of forestry in Tasmania, in particular the deforestation of native forest coupes, and the proposed Tamar Valley Pulp Mill.

Flanagan uses a number of textual devices in this essay to drive his argument. We are introduced early, for example, to the character of Bill Manning. Bill Manning has an interesting role to play in the text. He is both an insider and a victim. He thus acts as a rhetorical ally and as a representative of the victims – human and environmental – systematically destroyed by the Tasmanian forestry industry.

Bill Manning, Flanagan tells us, is a man who has worked in the Tasmanian forests for three decades, and he 'is no greenie hardliner'. Rather, he 'believes the forests ought to be logged, but logged so that they remain for the future'. This is an important inclusion, because it positions Manning away from the left of environmental politics in Tasmania, situating him as either neutral or to the right. In either case, we are to assume that Manning has personal ethics and informed opinion guiding his actions, not 'big P' party politics. From a readerly point of view then, his position is potentially harder to dismiss.

Flanagan creates an image of Manning that serves to build his credibility, both as an individual, and as a person with relevant industry experience. Manning's evidence to the Senate committee, for example, 'began slowly and methodically'; it was 'detailed, carefully presented'. The actions of the industry, by contrast, are described as 'an ecological disaster', 'unaccountable', 'out of control' and 'comprehensively in breech of Tasmanian law'. The industry, Manning asserts, is one which promotes a corporate culture of 'bullying, cronyism, secrecy and lies' (p. 184).

We are to assume that Manning's evidence to the Senate committee is accurate, firstly because of the status/importance of his audience as compared to, for example, expressing an opinion to a journalist, but also because of his 30 years' experience. Manning's role in Forestry Tasmania was as a 'forest audits officer, an industry policeman'. He is now a whistleblower; and having blown the whistle he has been, in his words, 'done like a dinner'. It is a familiar narrative.

We sympathise with Manning's situation because we believe him to be 'methodical', 'detailed', 'careful' and also ethical. Thus the ensuing 'smear' campaign against him, as

detailed by Flanagan, further highlights the unscrupulous operation of big business, run by big guys, with big money and big friends. Manning, the underdog in this scenario, becomes an even more trustworthy and believable character.

The idea of secrecy and 'fudging' underpin a great portion of this essay. It is a proposition supported by statements such as: 'The logging industry's astonishing exemption from the *Freedom of Information Act*...' (p. 185). This reveals both the apparent breadth of corruption at a government level, and Flanagan's indignation towards the situation, as evidenced in the use of the adjective 'astonishing'. We can thus read Flanagan's enthymeme as a want to persuade his readers to feel similarly impassioned about, and unimpressed with, the industrialisation of Tasmania's natural environment.

This essay is densely layered with fact. Flanagan's approach is one of relentlessness; there is a cumulative immediacy to his prose, reflecting the nature of the issues about which he writes. From Manning and the *Freedom of Information Act*, Flanagan turns to the practice of logging in Tasmania, 'Some facts... are beyond cover-up. Tasmania is the only state that clearfells its rainforest', he states. This 'destruction', Flanagan asserts, 'is being accelerated, driven by the greed for profit that can be made from woodchips' (p. 185). By clearfelling native rainforest, Gunns and the Tasmanian Government are implicated in the wilful destruction of some of Australia's finest natural assets. Flanagan writes:

> These aptly named kings of trees [*Eucalyptus regnans*] are the tallest hardwood trees and flowering plants on Earth, some more than 20 metres in girth and more than 90 metres in height. Most will end up as paper or cardboard in Japan. (p. 186)

That these 'kings of trees' end life as cardboard and paper products clearly evokes anger in Flanagan. His strong stance against this situation is argued using logos and pathos. Flanagan reinforces his position and approach:

> In logging coupes around Tasmania, exotic rainforest trees such as myrtle, sassafras, leatherwood and celery-top pine – extraordinary, exquisite trees, many centuries old, some of which are found nowhere else – are often just left on the ground and burnt. (p. 186)

The factual and structural framework of this essay is logic driven. It is, however, consistently underpinned with an emotive style. Again, word choice reflects this – *exotic, extraordinary, exquisite*; and the less alliterative, *many centuries old.* These adjectives bring Flanagan's subject to life in the text for they render *these* trees different from, and more important than, other trees. It is this that drives the subject. It is not just clearfelling, it is clearfelling of *irreplaceable* species.

Again in his relentless pursuit, Flanagan writes that the exotic, extraordinary, exquisite trees are being replaced by 'monocultural plantations of either radiata pine or *Eucalyptus nitens* [Shining gum]'. He tells us such plantations require high levels of fertilizer and pesticides which contaminate the local water. Furthermore, baits laid to protect the new plantation seedlings from hungry wildlife kill native animals, including rare and protected species.

The accumulation continues. In support of his claim about rare and protected species, Flanagan draws the reader's attention to the 'endangered giant fresh water crayfish'. Not only is it 'endangered' but it is 'one of the largest invertebrates in the world'. 'Frenzied' logging, suggests Flanagan, is putting this species at greater risk; a claim backed by 'crayfish expert Todd Walsh'. Thus, not only is Tasmania at risk of losing yet another species only found on the island state, but this risk occurs because of 'frenzied' acts, an implied, uncontrolled madness. Certainly there is an underlying inference that this is not the way in which we might expect environmental and economic policy to be formulated and carried out.

Flanagan suggests that the systems and processes that allow such 'frenzied' logging to take place in Tasmania are similarly out of control, or perhaps more precisely, out of democratic control. For Flanagan, then, the issues at stake here are not simply environmental, they are also political. The 'major political parties can become hopelessly compromised by their relationship with big business', he writes (p. 187). Flanagan draws an unflattering portrait of the Tasmanian state government, likening it to the same government which 'a century ago paid people to shoot the Tasmanian tiger'. It is a purposefully brutal comparison. Flanagan implies that history is being

repeated, as seen particularly in instances where there are large tax incentives for the establishment of plantations, and when Gunns pays only 'paltry royalties' for 'crown forests'; forests which are then clearfelled for the establishment of the said plantations.

Flanagan advances his argument. The issue of clearfelling native coupes in Tasmania, we are to understand, is further complicated by other developing industries, ostensibly more sustainable and more profitable than old-growth logging. We read that the 'destruction' of Tasmania's forests is being 'accelerated' at the same time as 'Tasmania was acquiring a global reputation as an island of exceptional beauty' (p. 189). The forestry industry is clearfelling Tasmania's 'unique natural' environment – the very environment that has sparked the interest of global tourism. It is a 'sad irony', asserts Flanagan, that though 'denied in Tasmania, did not however escape the more astute of the worlds media'. Such media coverage includes, he writes, 'major features' in 'the *Observer*, the *Independent*, the *Guardian*, on the BBC, in *Le Figaro*, *Suddeutsch Zeitung* and *The New York Times*.' (p. 189)

In Australia, Flanagan reiterates, the policies and politics which work in favour of the forestry industry in Tasmania, also have the effect of silencing its critics. Thus stories appearing in the international media are rarely, according to Flanagan, found in Hobart or Launceston. Instead, he suggests, the control of information is so tight that in Tasmania 'necessary fictions' are routinely 'repeated' by the forestry industry so as to become accepted truths. Flanagan provides further evidence of such control, explaining that when a local 'maverick' (implies a government position, not Flanagan's) news site featured a 'translation of *Le Figaro*'s feature' it was shortly followed by a threat of legal action, by the state government, on the grounds of defamation.

Flanagan's argument is carefully constructed. He continually builds upon his assertions with further evidence in support of his claims. For example, the destruction of Tasmanian forests is not just an issue of global or national concern – it is one of

great *local* concern, despite what media reports in Tasmania might indicate. This can be seen, he reveals, in state government polling in which it was:

> discovered that Tasmanians overwhelmingly wanted old-growth logging ended and, accordingly, Tasmania Together [a government driven community consultative process on a 'blue print' for the state's future] set a benchmark to end this practice in high conservation value forests by 1 January 2003... But in spite of the public's clear desire and Bacon's [the then Premier] own promise [to honour Tasmania Together initiatives], the government refused to contemplate changes to existing forestry practices. (p. 190)

Flanagan's enthymeme carries a great deal of weight and persuasive force. 'A subtle fear has entered Tasmanian public life' he tells us, 'it stifles dissent, avoids truth' (p. 190). A consequence of this is that the 'reality' of the forestry industry, namely 'that logging old-growth brings little wealth and few jobs' remains hidden from the Tasmanian people. It is an issue which Flanagan is seemingly attempting to rectify through 'speaking out' in this essay. The future of Tasmania's environment is no longer just a 'green issue', Flanagan reaffirms: it is also a 'battle' for 'free speech and democracy' (p. 193).

The futile destruction and political corruption Flanagan has portrayed is, in the final section of this essay, underscored one last time by the ironies at play in Tasmania:

> Key industries such as tourism and fine foods and wines trade as much on the island's pristine image as they do on the products they sell. There is growing concern in all these industries – in which job growth is concentrated – at the relentless damage being done to Tasmania's name by images of smouldering forest coupes.
>
> Tourist operators become ever more embarrassed at explaining away endless clearfells, processions of log trucks, the strange vistas of single-species plantations. (p. 192)

Flanagan ends his essay in a poignant yet solution-oriented way. He tells us that there is a place for old-growth logging in forests of 'low conservation value'. Such logging should be selective, maintaining the integrity of the forests, valuing the timber, and

favouring small local business. Such outcomes can conceivably be realised in niche furniture markets, for example, whereby 'A tiger myrtle veneer... table fetches $20,000' compared to the same timber which as woodchips sells 'for a few cents', or should that read 'sense'?

Flanagan's essay can be viewed in terms similar to that of Heilker's (1996) thesis/support form. He has two propositions which he sets out to demonstrate: firstly the rape, and secondly, the corruption, of Tasmania. Flanagan aims to persuade with his cumulation of facts, characters and evidence to support the validity of his argument. He is, therefore, concerned with a logos-centred rhetorical approach. As such we can read this essay in Rosenblatt's terms as having an efferent leaning. Flanagan's enthymeme, as has been noted, is to create a sense of outrage in his reader, for there to be some kind of 'action' resulting from the essay's reading. Flanagan's desire to persuade therefore lies not just in the reader accepting his stance, but also feeling outrage, and the urge to speak out. Understandably, therefore, there is little in this essay that points to an apparent consciousness of aesthetic style. Flanagan does, however, use adjectives to implore an emotive response; but this essay is, in stylistic terms, more a constructed argument than a narrative employing fictional techniques.

The arguments posed by Flanagan are compelling, and indeed it is this, rather than a play with language, which sustains readerly interest. Rather than describing the Tasmanian environment to the reader in any great detail, Flanagan's essay requires that the reader (particularly if he/she has not been to Tasmania) draw on other images commonly used to represent this island state –crystal clear waters, expansive forests, crisp, cool, clean air, as seen in tourism advertising, for example. Our mainstream media shows less of the destruction with which Flanagan is concerned (indeed this is part of his argument), and so to illustrate this he draws on images from other places, such as the napalmed jungles of Vietnam, and other ravaged war zones.

Flanagan does not appear in this essay, in the sense of the authorial 'I', nor is this essay a personal experience retold, with the exception of the detailing of an incident in which he and his 12 year old daughter were sworn at by a Tasmanian Government

Minister. Yet his ideology is blatant. It is an interesting essay therefore in that strong emotions, abhorrence and outrage, are presented by Flanagan as common sense, logical. It is a clever approach, though one that carries a risk of ostracising those with differing political or ideological agendas. Ostensibly however, this is not the audience at which Flanagan is aiming – perhaps it is rather the so-called 'post materialist left-leaning professional middle class' (Manne, 2004). In this way, however, there is a sense in which he is preaching to the converted. Perhaps for Flanagan, then, his drive is to rally the converted, to arouse public opinion and enforce State Government change, in a national forum – a change akin to that seen when the Federal Government stepped in on the issue of damming the Franklin River in Tasmania in the early 1980s.

Flanagan seeks to challenge the dominant discourses surrounding the issues of logging in Tasmania. Yet in terms of appropriation of the essay genre code, and in consideration of Lukács and Adorno's theorising, we do not see Flanagan utilising a style that in itself is a challenge to the ways in which knowledge can be seen to be created or constructed. While he does not present a sense of objectivity, this examination *does* show a fixed position, a requisite outcome. There is, then, very little sense in which the reader feels as though their role in the text is one of equal value, that there is a shared conversation taking place, that meaning is being created as a dual act. In this regard, Flanagan's essay arguably sits outside of what we have seen described as utopian views of the essay genre code. Yet as far as this kind of style and approach is concerned, we see that it is the most represented sub-genre across *The Best Australian Essays* collections from 2000-2008. Arguably what this reveals is that the essay in Australia enables our public intellectuals to further issues that otherwise do not always get space in the mainstream press.

Postscript

Three years after Flanagan's essay was first published, and 18 months after the analysis above was first written, a reworked and expanded version of the essay appeared in the May 2007 issue of The Monthly, *under the similarly provocactive title 'Out of Control: the tragedy of Tasmania's forests'. The headline on the front cover screamed 'GUNNS out of control'. This essay was read by*

businessman Geoffrey Cousins whose interest in the issue sparked a media campaign funded by prominent business people and Australian celebrities opposed to the proposed Gunns pulp mill in Tasmania's Tamar Valley. Cousins' interest in Flanagan's essay was so great that he reportedly paid for 50 000 copies of the essay to be printed and distributed in the electorates of the then Environment Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, and his opposition counterpart, Peter Garrett (Coorey 2007).

The ensuing media campaign gained significant coverage in the press and on television, so much so that the pulp mill in Tasmania became a significant issue, along with the environment in general, in the 2007 Federal election.

Flanagan's essay had an impact on national politics, if only briefly – reminding us of the spirit of Adorno's conception of the essay form as a politcal device (albeit one that here is critical rather than personal) and Rosenblatt's efferent reading whereby action precedes the reading of the text.

Critical essay II: 'Dots on the Landscape' by Drusilla Modjeska, *The Best Australian Essays 2000*, pp. 312-320

Modjeska's essay both begins and ends with the words of other writers, Douglas Stewart and Les Murray respectively; in this text we can see that all three writers are, in their own ways, trying to evoke a poetics of the Australian eucalypt. This is an intricately woven essay examining the literary, cultural and historical relationship Australians have had with this often mythologised species of tree. Modjeska's journey begins in Sydney at 'The nose of land that forms one side of Farm Cove, pushing into Sydney Harbour between the Opera House and Garden Island'. This piece of land, she tells us, was once covered in a forest of *Eucalyptus tereticornis*, or red forest gums. While over time this landscape has changed, in part due to the substantial number of trees that have been cleared, Modjeska draws attention to the revered beauty that this species of tree still provides, despite its declining numbers. She begins to set the scene for the contradictions and complexities through which this text will wander in essaying the eucalypt.

From the beginning of this essay there is an aestheticism that runs through Modjeska's prose. Her weaving of the past and present, the selection of details and subjects suggest a pleasure with language. The landscape is drawn in the first paragraph: trees, harbour and Opera House. The Art Gallery and Mrs Macquarie's Chair, weddings, tourists, photographs, ships, artworks, tree-felling, and prisoners fill this picture with evocative detail. This writing could go anywhere, and all roads seem interesting. In the very least Modjeska has set herself up as a highly skilful and knowledgeable narrator. There is, then, a story to be told, and there is something to be learnt.

Moving on from the introduction, Modjeska focuses her gaze on the historically uncomfortable relationship settlers had with the gum tree. This is revealed with the first artists

> struggling to find a form for the lugubrious trees that made them uneasy, [thus they] hid their gawky branches under the shapes of European trees.

and then to other national legends:

> In our novels, babies, wives and mates have been buried under eucalypts; women and girls have had their backs broken by falling branches; love affairs, adulteries and elopements have been conducted beneath the trees. (pp. 312-313)

Modjeska's choice of adjectives, 'lugubrious' and 'gawky' to describe these trees helps to underpin her position; she not only tells of the settlers' unease, she shows us in visual terms the source of this unease – the strange appearance of the eucalypt. This is then supported by the 'nationalist narrative' that shows the events, seemingly tremendous and intense, that have, in Australia's mythologised history, transpired under the presiding canopy of the eucalypt.

Modjeska uses art and literature to frame her examination and understanding of the eucalypt in the Australian national psyche, an approach perhaps inspired by her reading of Patrick White's (1940) novel *The Tree of Man*: '*The Tree of Man*... gave us the more difficult idea that our relationship with the trees might have more to do with poetry, even the sacred, than with our own identity' (p. 313). This can be read as the enthymeme of Modjeska's essay, and indeed we see in the text that follows an attempt to discover what this notion of poetics and the sacred might imply.

Moving into a more contemporary space, Modjeska walks the reader through a recent public art installation *Veil of Trees,* by Janet Laurence and Jisuk Han. Perhaps also part of the original impetus for this essay, the sculpture, which 'loops down the road to Mrs Macquarie's Chair' is a landscape of newly planted red gum saplings and also glass panels; the latter of which are 'speckled with ash, traces of minerals and indigenous seeds' and engraved with 'lines of Australian poetry'. It is Modjeska's attitude to this 'beautiful' sculpture that is perhaps most telling: 'It has a modest calm, a meditative quality that, like the trees, does nothing to vie for our attention'. Continuing with this line of thinking, Modjeska surmises her tentative understanding of the subject in relation to art and literature, contemporary and modern, and observes that :

> Our art and literature might be full of gum trees, but day by day we hardly notice them. Is it that they are so much part of us that we need something more dramatic to jog our attention? Or could it be that there is too much guilt for us to want to stand among the trees and reflect? For this sculpture - this work of art - seems to ask us to reconsider our relationship to the eucalypt and the past that is entangled with it. (p. 313)

Modjeska questions whether or not white Australia's understanding of the natural environment, an environment we 'crashed' into, has matured enough to value it for what it is, regardless of the potential 'conflict over comfort or profit'. The final line of this paragraph suggests that she is 'gloomy' about the reality or depth of understanding contemporary Australia displays: 'We argue over it, but we still fell the forests and pulp the trees'. The environmental impact of tree felling brings Modjeska to ruminate on the fate of the river red gum, and examine the related art exhibition, *Karra*. Karra is the Kaurna name for river red gums, and from this point in the essay Modjeska shifts between the nouns karra, river red and *E. camaldulensis* to name them. She plays with the poetry of the tree. The river red gum has an interesting role to play in this essay because its 'legends' are equally poetic and sacred, and its role is widely recognised as one that has been both practical (in dominantly historical terms) and environmental. Our realisation of the latter, as Modjeska reminds us, has been somewhat belated, because whilst the tree's

> water-resistant wood was felled for bridges, barges, fence posts and railway sleepers... [and] to burn in our grates and fuel our engines... Cut down, the river red gum could no longer play its part in the regulation of the water table.

The condition of the Murray-Darling basin is directly affected by our treatment of the river system and the removal of the river red gum. Modjeska questions whether, because of this, Adelaide residents, who have what might be considered in contemporary times the misfortune of living near the mouth of the Murray River – at that point in which the culmination of the river's poor health becomes most evident – are more likely to see in *Karra*, what Sydneysiders have been apparently unable to see in *Veil of Trees*. The health of our waterways and their interconnectedness with the

river red gum might be more prominent in the minds of Adelaidians, and if it is not, Modjeska implies, then it will soon need to be. For if the Murray River, without amongst other things the river red gum, 'turns to salt', Adelaide residents will not be able to 'boil the salt out of the water as we did the bugs that got into Sydney's water supply' (p. 315).

In the time since this essay was published in 2000, the conversations about the health of the Murray River and South Australia's water supply have become more prominent, pertinent, and urgent, in the media and between the Federal and relevant State governments. What Modjeska's essay perhaps offers such conversations is a voice which, in bringing together both the poetic and the sacred, prompts people to think about their relationship with the environment in more holistic terms.

Returning to the issue of water and trees in Adelaide, she suggests that exhibitions such as *Karra*, and the immediate nature of the environmental problems affecting the Murray, might have the effect of 'drawing their [Adelaide's residents] attention to the river red gums that are still standing in their city, some of them 500 years old and marked with unobtrusive plaques' (p. 315). Perhaps there is also the implication in this that looking at what remains will also draw attention to other environmental and socio-historical issues – that our nation's history is not just one history, that the degradation of waterways involves not just one river, that not just one species of native tree is in danger.

Though the potential gaze of Modjeska's essay is broad, this piece continues to circle around the art and literature which mark the representations and understanding of the eucalypt in Australia's history since settlement. She quotes at length from Murray Bail's novel *Eucalyptus*, and draws on the writings of botanist Martin O'Leary who published his own version of *Eucalyptus* 103 years earlier. In this latter account the eucalypt is revealed to hold medicinal properties – a notion that arguably supports Modjeska's enthymeme: the eucalypt is sacred. She continues

> *E. camaldulensis* is a remarkable tree. O'Leary tells of its capacities to endure fire and flood, and to hollow out its limbs and even its trunk in order to take

> advantage of the droppings of the birds and animals that live in these convenient hollows. It is an adaptation in 'nutrient-poor environments', he says that 'at the very least takes about 110 years to begin'. (p. 316)

The poetic is, however, just as important to Modjeska's enthymeme and the above quote is preceded by one taken from Nelson Varcoe's *Song for the River Red Gum*: 'No wonder the willows are weeping... they weep for those old gum trees'. This is an interesting inclusion, both for its poetic value and also for the broader evocations that can be read here. The willow is an introduced species in Australia. In many areas, it has replaced the river red gum and is choking the banks of our rivers and waterways. In this sense the European unease with the lugubrious and gawky eucalypt is not just hidden under the imagined forms of European trees (as with the first artists' impressions) but it has been replaced, physically, by these forms.

In the paragraph that follows on from that of the weeping willow, Modjeska considers the relationship between the Indigenous cultures and the river red gum. She writes that

> The Kaurna took the wood of the karra into their culture as containers, artefacts, weapons, canoes and music sticks, its richness spreading into their language and also ours when the bark containers were named coolamon. (p. 316)

The coalescing of the poetic and the sacred is subtle here, the mingling of 'richness' and 'language' – *theirs* and *ours*. There is an unease revealed here, and it is one that appears to have slipped from the writer's intentional rhetorical control. If Modjeska's enthymeme is to consider the eucalypt and the Australian environment more broadly in both poetic and sacred terms, one would imagine that there is much to be gained by an examination of Indigenous interaction with the trees and the land and water. This side-step into Indigenous culture above appears so cursory when compared with her extensive and varied discussions of European or 'white' Australian art and literature that when she writes of Kathleen Petyarre's *Dusk in Thorny Devil Lizard Country* as 'an invitation to a different way of mapping, and seeing, and feeling, the country', one wonders about the larger history of Indigenous artwork and literature which can be seen in a similar light. There is then perhaps the sense that Davis's (1999) concerns with an accepted aesthetic, one that is predominantly white

European, finds some validity here. His implied question '*Where are the other voices?*' seems all the more pertinent in an essay such as this where so few 'other' voices sit next to so many common ones – particularly given the subject matter.

We can read that Modjeska's discussions take their cue from the exhibitions that frame this essay; the artists and the artworks they present. But given that her gaze also looks beyond these exhibitions to other spaces where art and literature, in particular, can be found, her choices reveal, at the very least, a preference for a particular kind of artistic/literary work. This is potentially problematic in that she is arguing for a reconsideration of our understanding of, and relationship to, the trees. Implicit within this argument is that there is a need for us to reconsider our values and our ways of thinking. Yet we do not necessarily see this fully realised in Modjeska's own writing; despite the title of the essay. However, as Carter (2001) cautions, we need to be careful not to entirely annihilate the validity of the text even though 'other' voices have been, for the most part, sidelined.

There is a moment, towards the end of this essay, when Modjeska does touch on the 'romanticism, squeamishness, prejudice, irritations and doubts' of contemporary environmental battles – where all the 'camps', Aboriginal, bureaucratic, judicial, and feral, display 'hypocrisies'. This is revealed tellingly in the following

> 'Nature lovers', says a sign put up by one exasperated landowner, 'please do not shit in or near the [fuckin'] creek!' (p. 319, Modjeska's expletive)

For Modjeska it is in the literature and artworks examined that

> the distinction between art and politics is hard to maintain. Essay and exhibition, each comes out of a thinking that resists the urge to pit one thing against another, ordering and classifying, as so much in our culture does. Reading them, my frail hope is that we are seeing a new poetics, 'shoots of green thought', emerging even out of the most contentious aspects of our relationship with our trees. (p. 320)

For the most part there is a sense in which Modjeska has woven the poetic and sacred, our history and identity, to create 'shoots of green thought'. But there is also a silence which, by its very being, creates, perhaps an unconscious but no less

indicative, order or classification. Whose history, whose art and literature, whose sacredness, whose poetics, and, importantly, whose purpose? Can we really remove the borders of classification so easily as to create a homogenous whole?

Modjeska's essay revels in a sense of aesthetic pleasure, with a gratifying experience of language. This is seen most clearly in her selection of literary prose, from which she quotes extensively throughout the text, in both small snippets and lengthier segments. She quotes from authors Douglas Stewart, Patrick White, James Macauley, Murray Bail, Martin O'Leary, Nelson Varcoe, Gary Catalano, Judith Wright, Simon Leys, Kate Grenville, Gillian Mears, and Les Murray. She also calls upon the writing of Eric Rolls which she examines in some detail, but does not quote directly. This aestheticism can also be read it in her own descriptions

> It once grew all along the Torrens; it grew in the Adelaide Botanical Gardens, where there is still 'a remnant tree'; it grew in north [sic] Adelaide, where the smart shops are; it grew where the golf course is. (p. 314)

Or

> Eric Rolls writes of the karra as if it were a living character, a grand and noble being. He invites us to consider the living it has given us – those bridges and wharves and fence posts – and he details the life it has given the creatures of the bush: the ducks and parrots and owls and possums and goannas that live in its hollow branches. (p. 317)

Modjeska uses rhythm, here through alliteration and fragment length, giving her prose interest. She uses punctuation, as in the latter example, carefully – the en rule is more informal, more conversational, whimsical even; the use of the colon is conversely formal, ordered. Yet the absence of commas, replaced by the repetition of the 'and' gives a visual clarity to this paragraph as well as an unexpected aural one. It perhaps also points to a subtle shift in meaning – the man made versus the natural. Arguably we see an emphasis of sorts placed on the natural, the colon is a more dominant punctuating force than the en rule – it signals a greater importance. Rhetorically, such techniques point to a consciousness of language use, a sense of playfulness and indeed concern. There is as much a sense of trying to create meaning as there is a will to instil a particular experience, an aesthetic reading.

Modjeska has employed a largely ethos-centred rhetorical approach in this essay. She relies heavily on the work of others to frame her argument that our understanding and examination of the eucalypt needs to be read from a different position, for a deeper understanding of our relationship to our culture and environment to occur. She utilises the work of well-known Australian literary and artistic icons and assembles them together in such a manner as to render her enthymeme as a widely held view. More than this however, while Modjeska does not use narrative or a high level of fictional technique – as is perhaps more typically her 'style' – there is a consciousness of style. Thus Modjeska's writing sits comfortably, though it is positioned more as critical analysis, with that of her 'literary' and 'artistic' exemplars. That is, her writing displays in itself moments of the 'poetic'. However, the element of critical analysis adds a certain weight to this essay such that there is also an efferent reading taking place. At the very least Modjeska offers a number of theoretical and ideological positions worthy of consideration, post reading. In this sense there is no complete escape into the text; the reader is constantly probed to consider more deeply, the reader must work in an explicitly conscious way to make meaning, to create understanding.

As an 'essay', this text maintains that essayistic element of open examination, a sense of wandering through the subject matter for greater enlightenment. There seems to be a notion of chronologic ordering (Heilker 1998) whereby the words follow the mind, the structure appears fluid. Moreover, using the artwork as a device for examining life (culture) in the essay is a rhetorical approach recognised by scholars, particularly Lukács. In this way, we arguably see multiple points at which this text can be seen to be located within the essay genre code – both historical and contemporary.

Science/nature/travel essays

Science/nature/travel essays have been placed together in the division of sub-genres because, while ostensibly they represent individual 'characteristic substances', there is a tendency for these to knit together such that the nature essay might call on science or vice versa in support of the enthymeme, or travel, nature and so on. Also, perhaps more so than the other sub-genres, science/nature/travel essays carry the attribute of being overtly themed. Similarly, there is a case to be made with regards to likeness of purpose, perhaps because they are so 'themed', in which making science/nature/place accessible to a wide non-specialist audience forms an essential part of the text.

The science/nature/travel essays in *The Best Australian Essays* share a number of similarities with both the personal essay and literary reportage in that personal experience or participant observation are used to reveal a story. However, while story and ethos are used to persuade (as in the personal essay and literary reportage), logos also plays an important rhetorical role. Here then, we see the more formal discursive attributes, particularly associated with science, mix with the more subjective and literary. These essays reveal narratives of interest and drama, intermingled with facts, research, data, tested hypotheses, and in some cases, fixed conclusions.

What is interesting about the science/nature/travel essay is the attempt to make a specialist field, particularly that of science, accessible to the public. The reader is thus, in the case of the science/nature/travel essays in these collections, made privy to the world of the physicist, chemist, biologist, anthropologist, and world traveller. This sub-genre offers a point of difference to the more traditional discourses of science, biology, geography and anthropology by utilising the story as a rhetorical tool, thus, revealing meaning differently, and creating other ways of thinking and other kinds of knowing.

The following table represents the elements of Swales's (1990) definitional cluster approach utilised for determining typical instances of the science/nature/travel essay sub-genre in *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies.

Purpose	Form
- examination of natural/physical environment - bringing science/nature/place to a wide audience in an accessible manner	- often personal or participant observer - fictional techniques
	Structure - logos, ethos and story used to persuade - narrative structure can be varied
	Reader expectation - informative - science/nature/travel made interesting and accessible through use of fictional techniques (literary use of language, characters, plot, dialogue etc)

Table 5 Overview of the 'science/nature/travel essay' using Swales's (1996) definitional cluster approach

An examination of theses elements, and also the broader theories of the essay and literary texts discussed in earlier chapters, follows in the analysis of Paul Sheehan's essay 'Miracle at Bert's'.

Science/nature/travel essay: 'Miracle at Bert's' by Paul Sheehan, *The Best Australian Essays 2002*, pp. 56-70

What is apparent from the very beginning of this essay is the attention drawn, overtly, to the rhetorical strategies at play within the text. Furthermore, by highlighting these strategies, Sheehan also shows the ways in which the media and its texts influence human behaviour.

'Miracle at Bert's' is part personal essay, part literary/cultural criticism, but by the nature of its topic, it is also a science/nature essay. This point is made because, while this essay can be seen to cross a number of the genre appropriations analysed for this study, the enthymeme of the essay seeks to question the legitimacy of scientific practice that operates outside of the traditional scientific institutions, and its discourses. The notion of the possibilities and problematics of an alternative scientific discourse underpins Sheehan's essay; it begins:

> Because of something I wrote, thousands of people travelled to the Bert's Soft Drinks factory in southern Sydney. Mostly older people, mostly in some sort of pain. They stood in line, sometimes for hours, expectant, hopeful, nothing-to-lose, from all over the city and beyond. Some drove for hours. (p.56)

Although the reader is probably not yet aware of it, Sheehan has rendered himself as part of his own enthymeme – he, like the scientist, who is a key figure in this essay, is to some extent working outside of the traditional frameworks of scientific discourse. This is complicated situation for Sheehan, and indeed for the scientist, and it makes for a good story.

The story told here is about 'Unique Water', manufactured by Bert's Soft Drinks, and the science behind the product. It is also the story of Sheehan's reporting of the water, and his own experience using it. Sheehan's original text was published in '*The Good Weekend*', the Saturday magazine of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*... under the provocative headline, "MIRACLE WATER?"' (p. 56). The headline, we are to assume, is not Sheehan's. This is the first of a number of indicators that suggest a dichotomy between thought and action. Sheehan clearly has some reservations about what it is he is bringing to the public, or rather, the fact that he is making it public at all. He writes:

> At a moment like this, it is not the certainties that take hold it is the doubts. Had I sown false hopes? Had I done enough checking in the time available? I worried that people were turning up at Bert's to buy winning lottery tickets. Or Lourdes miracle cures. But nobody had been promised anything. (p.57)

The concern that Unique Water might be perceived as something of a dubious 'miracle cure' is due in part to the fact that Dr Beckett, the scientist and inventor behind the water, is not, Sheehan tells us, 'affiliated with any hospital, university or corporation'. Recognising that good science rarely exists outside of these institutions, Sheehan does not dismiss the 'bureaucratic, scientific and medical response to the story [which] was negative or indifferent'. Rather, there seems to be some concession in his tone that such a response is not only expected, but necessary. While Sheehan is cautious of the criticism levelled at Unique Water, he is able to use this criticism to his rhetorical advantage, in that he never loses sight of the ideologies involved in this story – he keeps all close to hand. Unique Water is never dismissed as a baseless cure-all, yet similarly Sheehan acknowledges there is no clinical proof to back the anecdotal evidence, his own included, that the water works.

Sheehan, in support of the beneficial effects of Unique Water, offers two written accounts, and six verbal testimonies from 'believers', people who have used it with positive effect. In addition he has seven sheep farms to support his claim. Convincing as these are, Sheehan also adds his own personal story of the benefits of Unique Water.

Sheehan's body is host to a 'constellation of auto-immune diseases' affecting his joints and immune system, and causing a great deal of pain. This results in severe fatigue. His illnesses, according to his doctor, are 'incurable' (p. 60). Sheehan explains that, typically, autoimmune diseases require a multitude of medications, many of which pose serious health risks in themselves. Furthermore, we are told, such medications are not overwhelmingly effective. Indeed for Sheehan, the only real relief from his condition has come from Unique Water:

> What is important here is that despite a range of treatments, including fifty-two sessions with various doctors and therapists and another fifty-four sessions with an acupuncturist (I've kept the 1,591 needles), despite exercise and diet changes and anti-inflammatory drugs and pain-killers and combinations of all of the above and none of the above, the only significant change in my condition came when I began taking what people call 'the magic water'. (pp. 60-61)

We never really learn how Sheehan himself came to hear about and begin drinking Unique Water. There is, however, an implied commonality in all of the stories he shares about others afflicted by autoimmune diseases and their experience of finding and drinking the water. These people's stories give credibility to the water, they provide further anecdotal evidence, and importantly, they stand with Sheehan's. Rhetorically, Sheehan uses other people's stories to reveal personal information he does not want, or need, to share. Thus when he quotes a fellow Unique Water consumer, there is an apparent resonance with Sheehan himself:

> Today after two years on the water, Kanaley is still alive and this is his bottom line: 'it is either the world's greatest placebo or it works remarkably well' (p. 62)

While a sense of caution or unease about Unique Water's position outside of the institutions of science always seems to 'ripple' through Sheehan's essay, those same institutions are never far away. Take for example Sheehan's reference to Dr Beckett's 'famous paper' in the book published in 1975, *Hardness of Drinking Water and Public Health*, and his 'seminar' at the Australian National University in 2002. Indeed, as Sheehan tells us, Dr Beckett is a 'biochemical pathologist', and more importantly, has patents on Unique Water in both the US and Australia. Yet Dr Beckett is also, as Sheehan points out, 'intense' and a 'crackpot'. Tellingly his Unique Water is called 'the magic water' by many of its consumers, also known as 'believers'.

Nonetheless, within all of this, there is a 'real' science behind the story.

> Beckett has built his work on two well-known, well documented facts – that magnesium has significant health benefits, and that bicarbonates are effective at reducing degeneration and carbon dioxide levels. (p. 66)

In simple terms Sheehan tells us that Beckett's research and his water are aimed at getting bicarbonates inside human cells to provide a 'natural buffer' against carbon dioxide (pp. 64-66). Carbon dioxide, explains Sheehan, is a toxic by-product in the body's production of energy – a necessary feature of living. Carbon dioxide produces acid which

> ... leaches through the body like acid rain... [providing] conditions for the great agents of aging – free radicals and oxidisation – ... [these] are also direct causal ingredients in rheumatoid arthritis... Alzheimer's... and many cancers and skin diseases. (Sheehan 2002, p.66)

By promoting cellular health there is, of course, a flow-on effect to the whole body: healthy cells make for a healthy body. The premise of Unique Water is that the magnesium bicarbonate is able to penetrate the cells and therefore provide a natural buffer against toxins such as carbon dioxide.

To the novice, as the reaction to Sheehan's first essay shows, the health benefits afforded by Unique Water seem legitimate, and interesting. However, we learn that the basis for the claims of Unique Water do lie in more than just theories, papers and anecdotal evidence. As if by some sort of divine intervention, at least as Sheehan tells

it, Beckett found, virtually in his backyard, 'what [he] had searched the world for – and not found': his theory at work in nature. This naturally occurring laboratory was found on several farms that lay atop a particular geological formation: a layering of granite and basalt. Water percolates through the granite and basalt, a process that results in a naturally occurring form of Unique Water. The outcome at these farms, where animals drink the water, is that livestock live longer, are fertile for longer, and therefore, remain productive for longer (pp. 64-65).

The science, and the story, behind Unique Water are both interesting and accessible. Sheehan presents the science in largely narrative terms, and as Hesse (1992) suggests, this gives rhetorical weight to the text. We are inclined to believe Sheehan and the legitimacy of Unique Water because the mode of story telling makes the scientific premises understandable and appealing. A significant element of the story-like nature of this essay is the nature of the characters Sheehan uses to drive the narrative, and, ultimately, his enthymeme. This is perhaps most obvious in the depiction of the scientist, Dr Beckett. Beckett embodies the dualities at play in this text – he is both a flamboyant crackpot and an intelligent, methodical scientist. We see this flamboyance in statements such as:

> This seminar is based on the hypothesis that there is no necessity or necessary reason for living organisms, including humans, to age physically, to suffer from degenerative diseases or to die (Beckett quoted in Sheehan, pp. 62-63).

In contrast, the methodical scientist is revealed when Sheehan explains that because Beckett had difficulty working 'within the system' he continued his research on his own. It is also at this point that the character of Beckett becomes a vulnerable individual. Sheehan tells us that a decade into these trials Beckett confided in a friend 'I'm buggered, I'm beaten, I'm stuffed'. Yet it was this confession that led to the discovery of the farms 'an hour's drive away' (p.64) in southern New South Wales near the Snowy Mountains on which Beckett found a naturally occurring version of his own scientific trials, and the stock records to prove it.

The development of characters and story in this essay show a fictional, writerly, approach. There is interest and intrigue; Dr Beckett is clever, perhaps a little difficult, but importantly undeniably human – a man driven by belief and passion, yet vulnerable.

This essay is also carried by the stories shown in the anecdotal evidence, which produces a sense of narrative, pathos, and logos driven legitimation. In rhetorical terms, the text is multi-layered, shifting between strategies, seemingly never completely comfortable with the value or impact of a singular approach. Sheehan is never entirely comfortable with his own personal evidence, or that of others, yet the apparent grand narrative associated with science cannot give validity to the work and research behind Unique Water. Sheehan does not dismiss science and its institutions or discourse, because he must concede that without such institutionalisation the full potential of the water can never be realised.

It is important to remember, however, that the development of Unique Water has not occurred entirely outside of the scientific community. Indeed the logic of Sheehan's arguments, in terms of a rhetorical approach which we might view as logos driven, encompasses the *actual* science behind the water – there are research, evidence, patents, records, and animal trials; and, as we learn at the end of the essay, there are soon to be human trials. We also see here a convergence of logos and ethos, because Dr Beckett is, despite his foibles, a scientist. Yet the logos of the narrative, at least in the discursive requirements of science and its institutions, reveals an inability to validate the evidence in support of Unique Water. However it is also the case that, having chosen to work outside of the institutions, Beckett's research still requires validation – an impasse that can only be resolved via the institutional success of Unique Water. Again the tensions in this essay are highlighted; ultimately Beckett's struggles with the institutions of science have become Sheehan's struggles with his subject.

What we can consider, then, is Sheehan's use of pathos as a further step towards a sense of legitimation of the Unique Water product, and of his own writing. While we

usually see the institutions of science approaching the public with already (we assume) validated research, drugs, evidence, and understanding, Beckett, and ultimately Sheehan, whose role in this story is profound, have turned this process on its head. But more than this, along with the rise of theories such as postmodernism, post colonialism and feminism (which seek pluralistic views of the stories we tell, including those of science), we have seen a public groundswell against specialised, closed, institutional discourse.

Running through Sheehan's essay is an aesthetic reading apparent in the use of narrative techniques such as character, dialogue and a continued sense of anticipation. There is an interaction with the text at the moment of reading which mimics the aesthetic readerly experience described by Rosenblatt (1978). Conversely, Sheehan makes an appeal to readers beyond the text itself – for action after the readerly event. This efferent (Rosenblatt's term) aspect of the reading can be seen in its simplest form as a prompt for potential 'believers' to try Unique Water. In addition, Sheehan's essay can be read as an attempt to further sustain, or reinvigorate, the initial public/institutional interest sparked by the publication of his first article. This, arguably, would have the effect of validating the science of Unique Water, and Sheehan's own role, as writer and public intellectual, in this story.

Auto/biographical essays

The auto/biographical essay shares many similarities with the personal essay and literary reportage, but we see differences most significantly in purpose, elements of form, and reader expectation. Perhaps the most apparent of these is a notion of 'wholeness'. The auto/biographical essay seeks to give a rounded picture of an individual relative to the entirety – or a significant portion – of their life. Whereas the personal essay centres on an experience, and literary reportage on an event, the auto-biographical essay often weaves together multiple experiences and events to map a narrative history of one person's life. As we see in the essay analysed in this section, a key event may form the framework of the text. However, this key event is positioned as representing and/or influencing the individual subject in a significant way. Further to this, these moments are indeed linked to the past, present and future in the text, as a framework within which the reader can begin to understand the subject and his/her interaction, place and purpose in the world.

The auto/biographical essay, in revealing the individual, uses narration to show (not tell) the character in action. As a result, the reader is more likely to feel empathy, and therefore a connection with the individual. Thus we can see the rhetorical elements of pathos and story at work in these essays, with ethos also playing an important role. Here the writerly persona is the element that might persuade the reader that, as Gornick (2001) suggests, she is being told all that she needs to know.

In *The Best Australian Essays* a significant proportion of the essays are biographical. Here the notion of ethos takes on another facet: the public intellectual as narrator. In instances where the reader is aware that the essayist has expertise in this sub-genre, for example ex-politician John Button writing about Paul Keating, and novelist Nadia Wheatley on the writer Christina Stead, there is an implied authority of both the form and the subject. Similarly, the public intellectual is presented as an expert in critical analysis and thus there is also an implied sense that there will be a significance to the

story, an edge or angle, that will perhaps provide greater understanding of the subject matter than that previously available.

The following table represents the elements of Swales's (1990) definitional cluster approach utilised for determining typical instances of the auto/biographical essay sub-genre in *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies.

Purpose	**Form**
- examination of person/self to understand a life lived and facets of what it is to be human in general	- centred on individual and key/defining moments of their life - fictional techniques - personal
	Structure
	- pathos, ethos and story used to persuade - narrative structure can be varied
	Reader expectation
	- to be made privy to private life - to feel empathy for the main character and gain an understanding of human experience

Table 6 Overview of the 'auto/biographical essay' using Swales's (1996) definitional cluster approach

The following analysis of Catherine Ford's essay 'Introduction to a Filthy World' examines the elements outlined in the table above, while also considering theories of the essay and literary texts discussed in earlier chapters.

Auto/biographical essay: 'Introduction to a Filthy World' by Catherine Ford, *The Best Australian Essays 2003*, pp. 1-16

Using her diary entries and letters written by herself and her mother, Ford attempts to piece together a nine-month sojourn around the world with her parents in 1970, in this essay. The purpose of the essay, Ford hints, is to discover something more about the trip itself, and more about her parents, her mother in particular. This essay is therefore an examination of human relationships, childhood, memories, and the cultural landscape of upper-middle class white Australia in the seventies. It is also a problematic text.

In this essay Ford weaves together her own diary entries and letters to her brother Jamie with letters, written by her mother, to Ford's grandmother, her Aunt, and Jamie

also. Ford's own writing is presented in all its awkward, parent-influenced naivety; and of course as readers, we accept the limitations of the fledgling writer's work. Tellingly, and in total contrast to this acceptance of the child-writer, Ford implores us, at least ostensibly, not to be so lenient on her mother's own writerly inadequacies:

> I look through my mother's letters hoping for some corrective to this complacency, hoping, retrospectively, for a light smack, perhaps, or at least a lecture on the world's grosser inhumanities, looking for something about *us*, blithe, uninformed and white, tourists in a country where, unlike our own, we might have been confronted on all three points. I was hoping in vain. (pp. 2-3)

Perhaps in an attempt to at least contextualise her mother's failings as a parent and a travel writer (these two 'character flaws' are indivisible in this essay), Ford offers a thin retrospective on her mother's life, up to the point of her marriage to Ford's father. Her mother's personal history is included here not to instil a sense of compassion on the reader's behalf, but rather to encourage a shared disdain for this 'never... purposefully neglectful person' (p. 3). Ford's attempt to reveal her mother's past as a way of perhaps explaining or vouching for the fact that she was unintentionally 'neglectful' reveals little tangible reason for her mother's apparent aloofness, though Ford suggests that having moved from Melbourne to Geelong after marrying, her mother's position in her family 'seemed to have been subtly, incrementally downgraded'. She similarly posits that this event '[in which] it has never been clear to me in whose estimation this was so' was not in any seemingly *real* sense 'specifically wounding' (p. 4). There is a sad irony in Ford's writing about her mother, in that her mother's 'failures of memory' and 'lapses of love' (p. 5) are approached with a comparable lack of compassion.

In many ways we can read this lack of compassion as the enthymeme of Ford's essay. Certainly she seems to argue for such a position by way of representing the mother and child as the accountable and the innocent. Rhetorically, as both a logos and pathos driven argument, it is difficult to counter Ford's position. It would seem that there can be little defence for a mother's 'lapses in love' for her children. But we see in Ford's writing that her mother was lacking in more than just overt love for her

children (though this is perhaps less evident to the reader than Ford might realise) there were also other *missing* aspects in her character; revealed in a recounting of a particular incident whilst in South Africa:

> Of all the sights I saw as an eight-year-old in Johannesburg and remember thirty-three years later, this incident, perhaps not surprisingly, is the clearest: my father in a barely controlled rage descending to the hotel's car park to catch out the black attendant using our car as a taxi, and my mother following him only to stand by and watch in complete silence, her feelings, whatever they might have been as she witnessed this confrontation, tightly reined in... My father, lazily indisposed, ever eager for a fight, enraged and happily letting fly and my mother, dithering, ten paces behind, upset yet not saying a word, an emotional 'hostage' to her marriage. (pp. 5-6)

It is unclear how Ford's father might be both 'lazily indisposed' and 'ever eager for a fight', and such contradictions and lack of clarity hinder analysis to some degree. That is, assuming that the contradiction is intentional, where is the context within which this might make sense? Ford's writing also displays other contradictions; where earlier in the paragraph her mother's position is unclear, 'her feelings, whatever they might have been', she is, four lines later, 'upset yet not saying a word'. And yet despite these rhetorical anomalies, there is still a sense in which the father's 'barely controlled rage', his 'happily letting fly', can be read as greater attributes than the 'complete silence' of her 'dithering' mother.

While Ford's father is present in this essay, in the sense that we are aware of him and his activities on the trip, his behaviour and role as a parent seem to be less significant to Ford. This in itself is an interesting attribute in Ford's rhetorical approach because her father, at least from what we read of him, seems to be no less flawed than her

mother.[14] Indeed at one point she writes

> He wasn't a writer, but his gaze, his sensibility is everywhere in my mother's correspondence and in my diary. It was he who bought the maps, he who decided where and what we visited, it was his antics and his judgements and his tantrums that ruled our lives. (pp. 6-7)

Yet even here, there is an implication that her mother has enabled her father to infiltrate her writing, that she is somehow responsible for allowing these antics to continue to have a life, to 'rule' their lives, by the act of, amongst other things, rendering them into her own written texts.

Ford describes her mother's letters as coded messages, which apparently reveal 'how dissatisfied she felt with herself, with him and with their life together' (p. 7). Such statements imply insider knowledge. Indeed Ford acts here as a decoder of her mother's letters, and more broadly of her life. Yet there seems also to be a sense in which Ford fails to recognise the role the reader of her essay plays in conjuring her mother through the 'original' texts and anecdotes supplied. In this way, there is little examination of the relationship between Ford and her mother that, in rhetorical terms, might produce a persuasive account as to why and how Ford feels and thinks the way she does about her. Arguably then, the issue of trust becomes highly pertinent; that is, does Ford present as a trustworthy narrator? For Gornick (2001) 'the ability to make us believe that we know who is speaking is the trustworthy narrator achieved' (p. 17).

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[14] Whilst on the one hand we must take what is presented in the essay here as the 'whole' text, in the sense of what is accessible to the *Best Australian Essays 2003* readership, there is a hint that this essay may belong to a larger body of work. No publication details are available for this essay in the final section of the anthology, which would lead one to assume that it has not previously been published; however, and more tellingly, on the back cover of the collection Ford's text is listed as '*A Voyage Round Parents*'. We also see in this essay a break in the text, indicated by a double line space in between which sits an asterisk. This is, it would seem, a common formatting device used in *Best Australian Essays* to indicate edits in original, larger texts. There is then at least an implication that this essay is an edited section of a larger text, in which perhaps Ford's father, as the title suggests, may hold a more contextually prominent position. Importantly, there is no record of a publication by Catherine Ford entitled, *A Voyage Round Parents*.

This is not to imply that Ford is absent from her own essay – we see a good deal of her childhood self. But by contrast we see or know very little of that child as an adult, as the writer of the essay. Furthermore, Ford's narration about her mother becomes somewhat problematic, in rhetorical terms, because of Ford's apparent lack of compassion for her. Gornick (2001) is worth quoting again on this point: she writes

> In all imaginative writing sympathy for the subject is necessary not because it is the politically correct or morally decent posture to adopt but because an absence of sympathy shuts down the mind: engagement fails, the flow of association dries up, and the work narrows... sympathy is simply a level of empathetic understanding that endows the subject with dimension... When someone writes a *Mommie Dearest* memoir— where the narrator is presented as an innocent and the subject as a monster— the work fails because the situation remains static. For the drama to deepen, we must see the loneliness of the monster and the cunning of the innocent. Above all, it is the narrator who must complicate in order that the subject be given life. (pp. 34-35)

The imaginative writing with which Gornick is concerned here is memoir and the essay – 'the art of personal narrative' as the subtitle of her book indicates. In considering Gornick's position on sympathy in 'imaginative writing', it is necessary to recognise that Ford does detect a sense of 'loneliness' on her mother's part, particularly with regard to her marriage and subsequent altered position in her family. Yet given the implication that the circumstances in which her mother found herself were not 'specifically wounding', such a show of empathy carries little prominence. Furthermore, and perhaps most resoundingly, we certainly see no cunning in the 'innocent' depicted in this essay.

While we might read Ford's enthymeme as disdain for her mother's anti-maternalism, her ability to persuade is hindered both in logos and pathos. Logically, it would seem, there is more to Ford's subject than she presents. Similarly we assume that there is more to the relationship between Ford and her parents, her mother in particular, than is made available to the reader. There is a sense in which the reader feels as though there are facts missing from this account. While Ford describes her mother's life experiences as 'not specifically wounding', and therefore, the implication is, not valid

reasons for her apparent poor parenting, Ford herself provides 'not specifically wounding' examples of how her mother might be seen to be a bad one. Thus the same line of logic can be applied to Ford's own argument: that her mother was *not specifically* unloving or neglectful.

The apparent elasticity of Ford's logic in this essay affects the persuasive potential to come out of a pathos for the characters. That is, we see none of the characters as *specifically* wounded, wounding or flawed, and as a result Ford's essay becomes a tale of a rather unremarkable family on a potentially remarkable journey; which sadly, because of the characters' ordinariness, ultimately becomes ordinary too. Perhaps this is the point.

This, ultimately, is an unremarkable tale about the remarkably ordinary. It is also therefore an essay about perspective, about our ability to see and make sense of the world. Yet in choosing the memoir/essay genre as a vehicle for such a tale, Ford has forsaken scepticism, self-examination and the potential 'flow[s] of association' (Gornick 2001, p. 35) – the traditional hallmarks of such writing.

The stagnation is profound in this essay; it strays very little from the letters and diary entries that mark the apparent impetus of the text in the first place. Perhaps because she hasn't expanded upon that which is immediately available to her, in the sense of broader implications and contexts, when Ford does make those few associations which point to bigger issues involving the relationship between her characters, they are unconvincing. For example:

> My mother continues in this light-hearted vein for six whole pages, eventually signing off with a slightly guilty *I guess you'll be sick of this by now, so I'll finish. Hope school's okay*, as if she had only narrowly remembered who she was writing to and what her responsibilities to her son were. (p. 3 author's italics)

Or

> 'We raced down to see the Falls,' she writes to her mother and sister, 'and were struck dumb! It's something you have to see for yourself – words are so inadequate... All for now. I've run out of space, but I could go on forever. You'll just *have* to come here somehow.'

> What was my mother thinking? That my septuagenarian grandmother would travel to Africa to see a waterfall when she could hardly make it to Geelong in a car? (pp. 8-9)

And

> 'Cathy', she adds, 'was goggle-eyed at their tantrums.'
> How I must have envied them the freedom to throw one! My mother, the craftiest of disciplinarians, greeted any form of rebellious or rambunctious behaviour from me with this confounding statement, which always had the desired effect of total paralysis. 'But Cathy,' she would say at the necessary moment, 'I thought you were my friend.' (p.11)

It is obvious that Ford considers her mother to have been a poor one given her reading of her mother's letters and memories of her actions. To a third party, however, the examples above do not possess great persuasive force – they do not reveal a *specifically* flawed individual. Rather, Ford herself appears as a reader taking a bad writer's words too literally, and as a child in need of a little more spirit or 'cunning'.

Given Ford's specific choice of genre and topic, and the apparent failures and contradictions, which seem to be less intentional than editorial issues, there is little to draw the reader into the narrative itself. Yet there is surely a story in this essay, it just doesn't move forward; the characters do not develop, there is little sense of mystery or intrigue, and in a rather banal manner the tale ends at its most obvious point, with the end of the journey and her mother's final letter home. This final letter Ford describes as a point-scoring exercise, 'a technique which must have served her well in the past... with one compact anecdote, innocent-seeming but dissociating, she could express something of her grief... of losing a mother and becoming a wife, all at the same time' (p. 16). This may be true, but Ford gives her reader few markers throughout the essay that help to make the connection so palpable between her own conclusions above, and the anecdote below:

> 'We sat next to a very nice Samoan woman on the plane,' she reports. 'She had a beautiful pearl ring – three enormous pearls which Bruce admired. She gave it to us to have a look and the big dill asked her if they were real! She laughed, and said, "My husband said so when he gave them to me, so I guess they are!" 'Her

> husband', my mother concludes with glorious but vengeful flourish, 'only turned out to be the Prime Minister of Western Samoa. Trust Ford to put his big foot in it!' (p. 16)

But is this a grief-stricken and vengeful coded message, or an amusing anecdote that any participant observer may have recounted in a letter home? Again, the potential readings of the texts Ford has woven together are varied and her signposts ambiguous to the outsider. If we consider Hesse's work on narrativity as a rhetorical tool, whereby the reader is an active participant in the persuasive act (because of his expertise with story telling), and 'the reader [is encouraged to] construct a sense of order in the texts [which] makes him or her complicit with the writer' (Hesse 1989, p. 114), arguably this essay fails in the rhetorical strategy which it has endeavoured to apply. Ford's sense of the characters and events is so varied from the reality of the reading that such complicity becomes unachievable. This is perhaps most evident in the notion that Ford seems to *tell* rather than *show to* her reader, whereas the reverse (showing not telling) is what invites complicity between reader and writer (Hesse 1989). Although Ford provides numerous 'examples' of her mother's writing we are ultimately *shown* very little despite what Ford *tells* us. The most apparent missing element seems to be an examination of the process which led Ford to reach such conclusions about her mother (and her relationship with her mother) – the reader is not shown how or why Ford has developed such apparent disdain for her.

The title of this essay, 'Introduction to a Filthy World', is both provocative and intriguing. Throughout the essay we learn that the measure of a place, according to Ford's mother, was its level of cleanliness. We are also made privy to the less sanitary aspects of the relationships between Ford's mother and father, and between mother and daughter. Yet the notion of 'not specifically' which Ford raised early in this essay continues throughout the text, diluting both the provocativeness and intrigue.

It is interesting that this essay occupies the prominent position as the first essay in *The Best Australian Essays 2003* collection, for it is a previously unpublished essay that may

possibly be a section of a larger text.[15] This raises speculation as to who and what gets published under the auspices of 'Australia's Best' essays, and the reasons for publication. Craven posits in his introduction to the anthology (p. xiii) that 'Introduction to a Filthy World' adopts fictional techniques, yet it is arguable that these have the kind of power he implies, particularly in contemplation of Gornick and Hesse's positions on the mechanisms through which fictional elements in narrative achieve their persuasive possibilities. Though in one sense it can be argued that the inclusion of this text in an anthology of Australian essays seeks to extend any notions of what might constitute a piece of writing in this genre, there is also a notion that such boundaries might have been pushed, in this case, at the expense of quality.

[15] See previous footnote.

Occurrence of essay types in *The Best Australian Essays*

In the previous section the sub-genres of the essay published in *The Best Australian Essays* and exemplars of essays in each of these categories were examined. The close analysis of individual essays considered, based on Swales's (1990) definitional cluster approach, purpose, form, structure, and reader expectation; and also, in keeping with a "new rhetorical" approach to analysis, language and stylistic choices and broader theories of the essay and literary texts – 'the *arts of discourse* and context' (Andrews 1992).

Having thus considered the features or elements of each of the sub-genres and how these affected and effected a reading and close analysis of the individual essays, it is now useful to examine the quantifiable occurrence of these sub-genres, in *The Best Australian Essays* collections for each year from 2000-2008, and under each editor. Such a task provides a visual and statistical map, offering an alternative model by which to gauge how the anthologies might be seen to differ, or not, under the editorial influences of Craven 2000-2003, Dessaix 2004-2005, Modjeska 2006-2007, and Marr 2008.

The table over the page plots the occurrence of the six sub-genres for each year from 2000-2008.

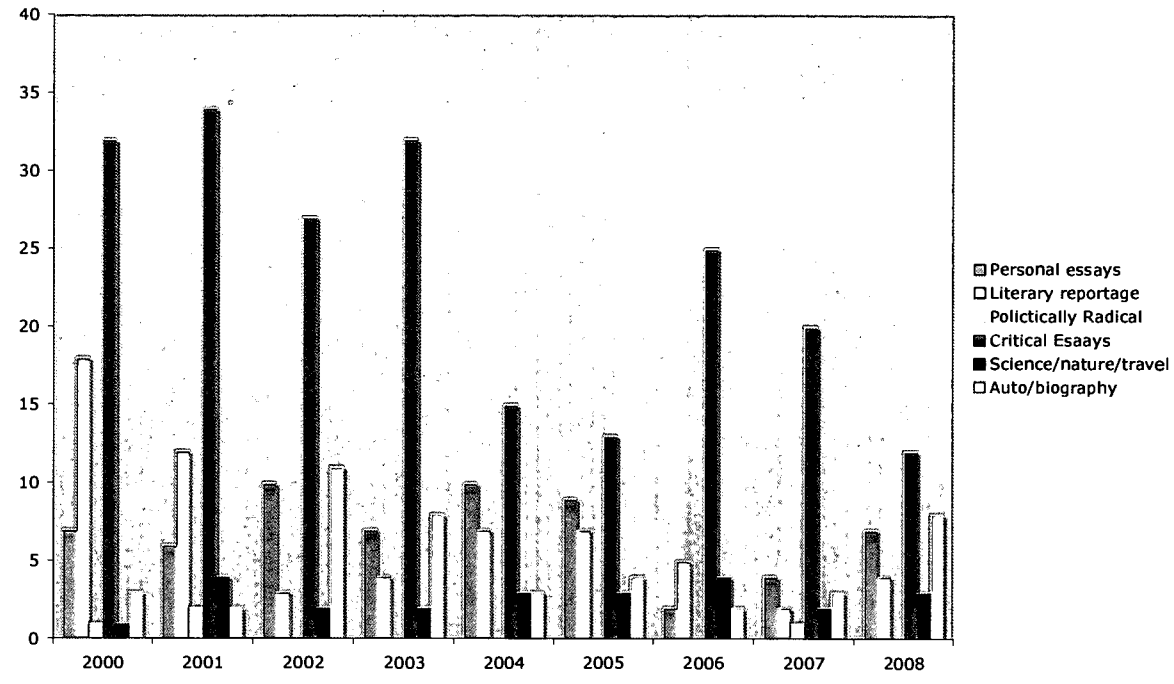


Figure 11 Overview of the occurrence of essay sub-genres in *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008

This table shows the overall trend in sub-genres occurring in the individual *The Best Australian Essays* collections from 2000 to 2008. Critical essays form the largest contingent of essay 'types', and whilst this is true for each of the four editors, it must be noted that this is not necessarily indicative of 'style'. As has been discussed, style is not the only indicator of genre, and thus one would caution against making judgements about an editor's 'stylistic' preferences based on the tables above and the figures below, with particular regard to the critical essay. What could be surmised from the table above, however, is that the occurrence of the critical essay sub-genre suggests a preference towards an essay text that is factual, descriptive and implies a high-level of writer/reader expertise and engagement. Importantly, such essays, while critical in approach, may or may not show a concern with language or literariness, and can utilise a range of narrative techniques. Thus a critical essay may present a personal account written using the first person pronoun, or may use a thesis-support method where the essayist as narrator remains absent from the text. What is imperative to the critical essay is the notion that it is a literary/cultural/historical examination aimed to inform and critique, based on an assumed or apparent expertise in the field or subject under examination.

While the graph above provides an overview of *The Best Australian Essays* across the scope of this project, from 2000-2008, it is useful to also consider this data in the context of each editor. Although these figures do not indicate editorial style (in Swales's terms), *per se*, certainly the kinds of essays each editor has published indicate a preference for an essay type – this is particularly noticeable in the collections of Dessaix and Marr. The figures on the following pages show the occurrence of sub-genres within the collections of the individual editors.

Critical essays form the largest sub-genre grouping under Craven's editorship. Comparatively, literary reportage, personal essays and auto/biography occupy similar ground at 16%, 13% and 10% respectively. Though two of the three politically radical essays are published in Craven's collections, like Modjeska, this category only accounts for 1% of the essays appearing in his *The Best Australian Essays*. Craven publishes, in percentage terms, the least number of science/nature/travel essays of the four editors.

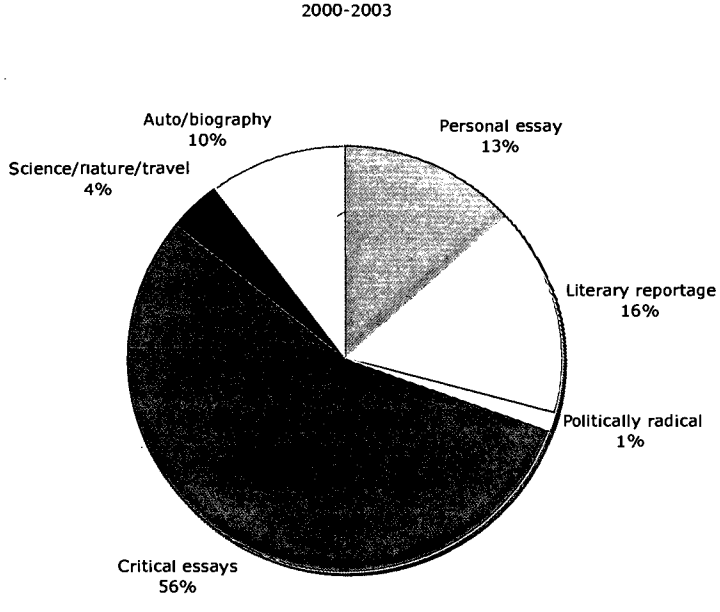


Figure 12 Occurrence of sub-genres under Craven's editorship 2000-2003

Dessaix's editorial choices show a relative evening out of the sub-genre categories, compared with choices made by Craven and later, Modjeska. In percentage terms Dessaix's collections contain the greatest number of personal essays and literary reportage. Interestingly, none of Dessaix's collections contain politically radical essays. A reading of Dessaix's collections suggests a great concern with notions of language and literariness, and the collections reveal a more conversational approach (as is in keeping with his editorial comments) that is perhaps more quiet and considered than that of his predecessor. Certainly, given the number of personal essays published under Dessaix, we see the authorial 'I' in action more often; and likewise, the examples of such essays coupled with a higher number of literary reportage, for example, reveals an overall text in which fictional techniques are more prominent.

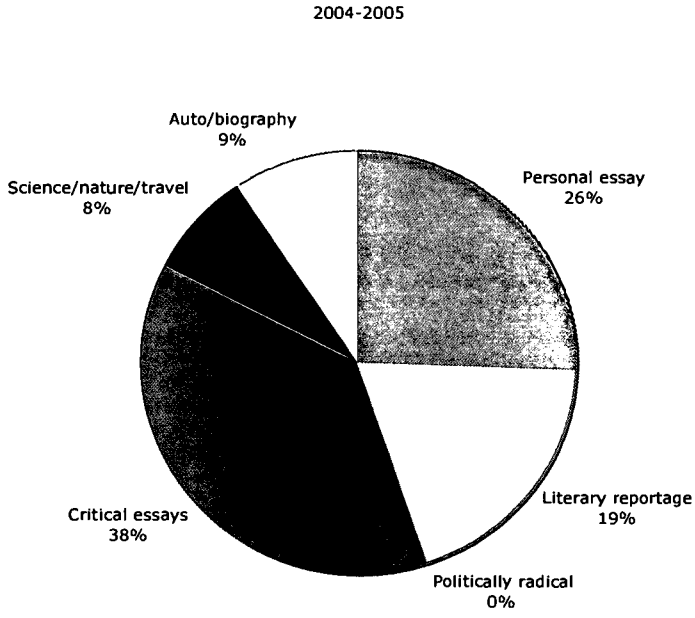


Figure 13 Occurrence of sub-genres under Dessaix's editorship 2004-2005

The occurrence of sub-genres in both Craven's and Modjeska's collections is similar, although in percentage terms we see literary reportage, the personal essay and auto/biography occurring more often under Craven. Modjeska publishes, in percentage terms, the same number of science/nature/travel essays as Marr, higher than both Craven and Dessaix. Modjeska's collections contain by far the highest

percentage of critical essays (64% compared with Craven at 56%, Dessaix at 38%, and Marr at 34%). However, a reading of Modjeska's collections, though critical in bent, arguably shows a preference for the 'writer's essay' (her term) – that is, one highly concerned with language and literary techniques.[16] Thus, while Modjeska and Craven are the editors who show the greatest predilection for the critical essay, revealing similarities in purpose and reader expectation within the text, the style and form of these said texts varies between the two, producing, ultimately, a very different set of anthologies.

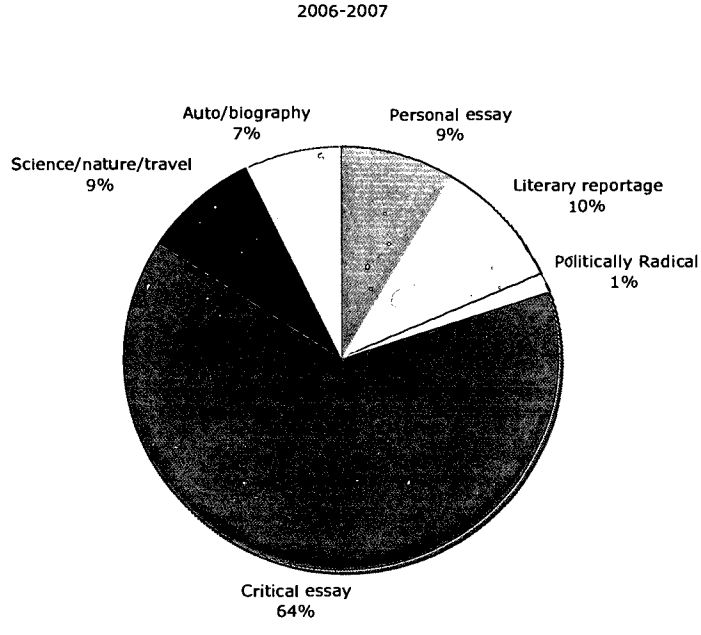


Figure 14 Occurrence of sub-genres under Modjeska's editorship 2006-2007

Similarly to that in Dessaix's collection, the distribution of the sub-genres in Marr's collection is more even. Where Marr can be seen to differ markedly from the other three editors is in the comparatively large number of auto/biographical essays he has chosen to publish (24% compared with Craven 10%, Dessaix 9% and Modjeska 7%). Stylistically, Marr's collection reveals a concern with story and narrative. While a notion of story-telling crosses through all sub-genres, this rhetorical approach is

[16] Notably, this approach within the critical essay sub-genre is seen in practice in Modjeska's own essay analysed earlier in this chapter.

arguably most apparent in personal essays, literary reportage and auto/biography; three sub-genres that alone make up more than half of his collection.

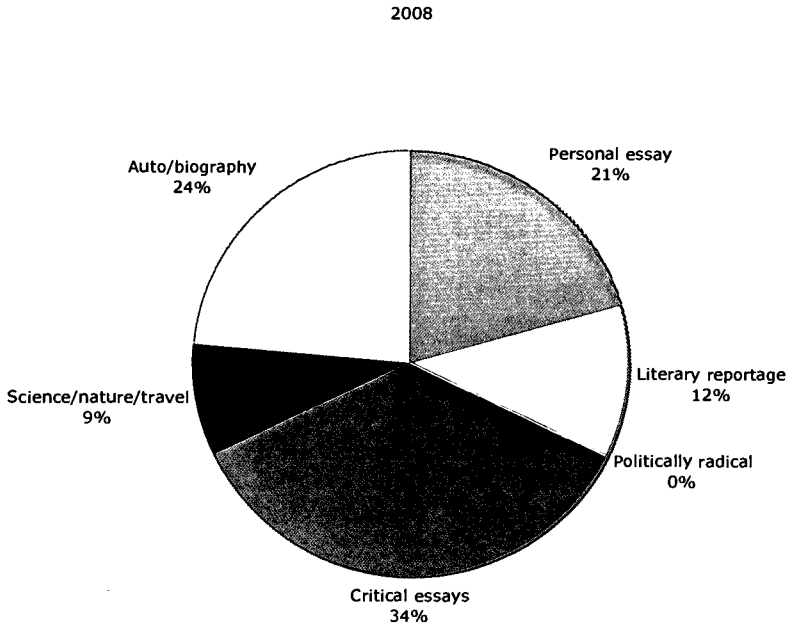


Figure 15 Occurrence of sub-genres under Marr's editorship 2008

The high percentage of critical essays within the collections from 2000-2008 signal a concern with notions of the public intellectual, and the robustness of intellectual examination in the essay genre more broadly. Notably, the subject matter of the critical essay is inherently public, in terms of its accessibility beyond or outside of the essay text.

This differs from the examination occurring within the personal or auto/biographical essay, or literary reportage, for example, which while holding broader more universal implications, is a subject matter otherwise not accessible to the public. If we consider the examples of these essays examined previously in this chapter, the public versus private becomes clearer. The two critical essays analysed, while stylistically very different, consider public issues: Flannagan on Gunn's and forestry in Tasmania; and Modjeska on a poetics of the eucalypt seen through our nation's art and literature.

Although neither essay seeks to hide personal opinion or ideology, their subject matter is inherently public.

Conversely, the subject of Horne's personal essay, his body, is highly personal, and available to the reader only through a reading of the essay text. While Horne's reflection also ventures into the public domain, specifically the changing cultural values associated with our bodies, it is always centred on his own, otherwise private body. Similarly, Sherborne's 'day-in-the-life' of divorce lawyer Stephanev is an account of a private world made public within the text. Again, the issues in this essay have a broad reach, but we read them via the singular and private life of another.

While the public or private subject matter does not necessarily advance or diminish the essay text,[17] the high proportion of critical essays published in *The Best Australian Essays* would certainly seem to indicate a preference towards literary/cultural/historical and, therefore, *public* subjects. This is an interesting aspect of *The Best Australian Essays* collections, particularly considering the discussions (including those of Craven, Dessaix and Modjeska)[18] and theories of the essay in which personal experience is proclaimed as a revered hallmark of the form. Perhaps we see in the Australian context, a historical unease with the personal – something akin to Kylie Tennant's (1968) proposition that the essay in Australia is historically linked to journalism because 'journalism, whereby a man earned his living, was approved, but "literature" could demand no pampering' (p. 3). In much the same way, there is an argument to be made that in the Australian essay, Tennant's notion of "literature" can be replaced with the "personal" to similar effect. That is, there exists a culture in which the "personal" has, traditionally, in this country, been viewed with a certain amount of suspicion, while the "public" subject in the essay has been 'approved'.

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[17] Though this is a contentious issue for some scholars on the essay form – see Chapter 2.
[18] All three editors evoke the personal essays of Montaigne as a kind of reference point from which considerations of the form might extend. To this end we can read that the personal experience so inherent to Montaigne's oeuvre strikes a chord of appeal; and indeed it is this style and approach that Craven, Dessaix and Modejska so openly revere in the essay.

In the past decade, and more noticeably in the last five years, there has been a shift in this phenomenon, seen in the rise to prominence of the memoir, penned by celebrities and *nobodies* alike;[19] seen in the increased space and prominence given to 'op-eds' (opinion editorials) in newspapers and their weekend magazines; seen in the blogging phenomenon – though blogging is not strictly limited to the personal it does take its cue from personal dairy writing; seen in the now widely available life-writing courses; seen, importantly for this project, in the increasing dialogue and debate in this country about the essay, its traditions and potential, amongst academics and 'amateurs'; and consequently seen in the increased publication and prominence of personal essays in newspapers, literary magazines and anthologies such as *The Best Australian Essays*.

However, the public subject in the contemporary Australian essay still dominates the most readily available examples of the form; and similarly, the most prominent *The Best Australian Essays* contributor, Robert Manne, rarely pens a personal pronoun. This does remind us, ultimately, of the consistent contradictions and complexities in examining a genre so inherently flexible in style and approach.

Some concluding notes on analysing *The Best Australian Essays*

The analysis presented in this chapter considers *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008 in both macro and micro terms; presenting something of an overview of the collection as a whole, and also, examining in close detail specific examples of the essay form. Like the essay itself, *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies show a multiplicity of appropriations, understandings, opinions, and preferences of, and for, the genre. A change in the series' editor, first in 2004 and then every two years since, has seen a notable shift in both the kinds of essays published (though Craven and Modjeska have compiled, in generic terms, similar collections) and the original sources of the 'best of' essays.

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[19] An issue discussed by Lorraine Adams (2001) in her tellingly titled article, 'Almost Famous: the rise of the "nobody" memoir', published in the *Washington Post*.

The shift away from Australian newspapers as a key source of essays for the series coincides with the end of Craven's editorship and the publication of a new literary magazine, the *Griffith Review, in* 2003. The publication of the *Griffith Review* is particularly noteworthy because it has a significant amount of publication space devoted to the essay – more so than any previous print literary/cultural magazine in Australia. The arrival of *The Monthly* – which follows the *New Yorker* in style and format (journalism meets the periodical), where the *Griffith Review*, by contrast, takes on attributes of the academic journal – two years later, further instilled Australian magazines as the key source for the 'best of' essays from 2004 onwards.

There have been some shifts in the location of original essays sourced, and essay types, published over the life of the series, whereas, by contrast, there have been some noteworthy consistencies in the essayists published in *The Best Australian Essays*. These consistencies, as discussed earlier in the chapter, show the essay in Australia to be a vehicle for the nation's public intellectuals to pontificate on issues such as culture, politics and identity. Importantly, the public notoriety of these people is not limited to *The Best Australian Essays*; indeed, the collection is arguably dependent on the status of its contributors – the bigger, better known names acting as something of a marketing drawcard. Yet neither has *The Best Australian Essays* limited its selection of essayists to only well-known writers – though academic, professional and writerly credentials are provided for each contributor, perhaps to legitimise their inclusion in the anthology above and beyond the essay text. This apparent process of granting authority (to comment) suggests something of an unease with the theorised rhetorical and social potential of the essay, as examined in earlier chapters, and also, the current cultural condition that we *know* the writer outside of the written work.

Following on from the consideration of essayists published in *The Best Australian Essays*, a close examination of the essays in the 2000-2008 anthologies was presented. In this section the types of essays occurring in the anthologies were categorised into six sub-genres – personal essay, critical essay, literary reportage, politically radical, science/nature/travel essay, and the auto/biographical essay. The sub-genres identified for the analysis in this chapter are based on the definitional cluster approach

described by Swales (1990). This categorisation of the essays in *The Best Australian Essays* is useful because it enables critical analysis of the form, despite the apparent variations in approach. This methodology provides, as Swales notes, 'protection against facile classification based on stylistic features and inherited beliefs'. A definitional cluster approach to the analysis of instance and typicality in genre enables, therefore, 'independent and open-minded investigation' (p.46). This is useful because it frees this project from the restraints of 'inherited beliefs' – particularly those associated with utopian ideals of the essay – and validates the nomenclature for genre attached to *The Best Australian Essays.*

The notion of a sub-genre of the essay is a necessary one, at least for the purposes of analysis, given that the term essay has historically been appropriated in a multiplicity of ways. This is certainly true in the case of *The Best Australian Essays*, as we have seen, but it is not a phenomenon exclusive to this collection. Terms denoting sub-genres of the essay such as the personal essay, English essay, academic essay, nature essay, segmented essay, periodical essay and familiar essay, have all been used widely and in many cases, historically, in discussions of the genre. Thus, while the term 'essay' names a set of communicative events, the nomenclature arguably holds little meaning, in descriptive terms, for those without genre-specific expertise. And indeed given that 'essay' has become something of an umbrella term encompassing many different kinds of essay texts – with varied purpose, form, structure and reader expectation – sub-genres have become important indicators of those variations such that members of particular discourse communities can continue to 'realize communicatively the goals of their communities' Swales 1990, pp.52-53).

From the discussion and close analysis of *The Best Australian Essays* within the historical, scholarly and cultural frameworks presented in this and earlier chapters, we move onto the concluding chapter in this project. The final section is less a conclusion and rather more a consideration of the territory this monograph on the contemporary Australian essay has covered, looking at the key issues, players and appropriations of the genre in this country. Here too, the possibilities for further study, and where this project might be located within the already existing research and

dialogue on the essay, will be contemplated. It is, therefore, the 'final contemplations and ruminations on the contemporary Australian essay'.

Part V

Final contemplations and ruminations on the contemporary Australian essay

Chapter 6

Reading the map: the journey thus far

In beginning this project it was intimated that the objective was to produce something of a map of the Australian contemporary essay. In doing so the focus of the project has been nine core texts – *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008. Importantly, however, these texts are located within a history of the essay form that dates back, in the very least, to the sixteenth century French nobleman, Michel de Montaigne. As has been discussed, Montaigne is considered to have, in fathering the form, set the benchmark for all essays and would-be essayists who followed. Yet the history of the essay reveals a thoroughly flexible, if somewhat ambiguous form, one which has been appropriated in many ways, often far removed from Montaigne's "benchmark". While it would seem that from the very beginning the essay offered great aesthetic, cognitive and philosophical potential – resulting in theories of the essay from Lukács (1974[1910]), Adorno (1984 [1958]), and others – these three elements have by no means resulted in a uniform understanding or application of the essay in any generic sense. Indeed we can argue that Lukács's and Adorno's theories both recognise the plurality inherent in the essay and, as such, attempt to reign in this plurality – given that the plurality was seen by both scholars as akin to corruption – through the development of a utopian, and an ironically fixed,[1] notion of the genre.

In contemporary times we have seen the essay, most noticeably in the United States, fall under the umbrella of a so-called 'fourth genre' (Root & Steinberg 2001): creative nonfiction. This fourth genre has not, however, resolved the genre issues associated with the essay, given that creative nonfiction is unable to deal effectively with essays that fall outside of its prescribed domain; that is, essays that are *not* inherently personal, self-reflexive, or fundamentally concerned with language use, for example.

[1] It must be remembered that both Lukács and Adorno saw the essay as a means to prevail over the fixed boundaries between disciplines, in particular arts and science, and hegemonic ideologies.

For this project, then, theories of the essay and a new dialogue centred on a notion of creative nonfiction, examined in Chapters 1 and 2, have not, alone, been adequate tools to deal with the contemporary Australian essays published in *The Best Australian Essays*. Attention was thus turned, in Chapter 3, to the scholarship of literary theory, a field of study concerned with the critical analysis of readers, writers and texts – theories which offer a means to analyse *The Best Australian Essays* in a holistic and significant way. This latter point is important as it has allowed all essays, but particularly those examples which might be seen as a-typical instances of genre, to be examined critically in the context of the genre, rather than dismissed as "not an essay". This has been a necessary stance in this project, given that the stated objective was to map the territory of the essay in this country. Therefore, we are not concerned here with determining the inclusion or exclusion of particular texts within the genre code, but rather with examining those texts which others, with so-called 'genre expertise' (Swales 1990) – Craven, Dessaix, Modjeska and Marr – have offered as exemplars of the essay. This in turn is the means by which we have been able to gauge the status of the genre – that is, what kinds of writing get named and published as essays, and read in contemporary Australia.

The methodological approaches to textual analysis examined in Chapter 3, and in particular those of a "new rhetorics" approach and genre theory,[2] defined *context* as a necessary element of critical analysis. Context here takes on multiple meanings, the context of reading, history, culture, and institutions, for example. This project has not been concerned with identifying the context of reading for individuals, beyond that of my own reading as researcher, but is, rather, highly concerned with the national, historical, cultural and institutional context of the essay in Australia; and it is these contexts that were examined in Chapter 4.

The examination in Chapter 4 began with the positions of Davis (1999) and Carter (2001) on the contemporary Australian essay. Both scholars identified the Australian

[2] With relevance to the preceding paragraph, these two theoretical and methodological approaches are located under the rubric of 'literary theory'.

essay "scene" as dominated by a small, but influential, group of people. For Davis, this is a disturbing circumstance, indicative, he suggests, of one group's struggle for power and influence at the expense, seemingly, of other groups, ideologies and voices. Of greater concern for Carter, however, are the aesthetic and ethical implications associated with a performative genre like the essay, and its status as something of a lifestyle product. Carter's concerns about the aesthetic and ethical are not easily resolved, as he acknowledges. Carter has argued, in regards to this, that within the current consumer market we cannot know the extent to which the ethical implications of particular essays are undermined, or not, by their "consumption" as aesthetic, lifestyle products, without a detailed study of the reading practices and outcomes of individual readers.

Also in Chapter 4, the historical position of the Australian essay has been examined. Here we see that the essay in Australia is influenced by the literary and cultural shifts of the twentieth century. Of particular note is the divide, established early on, as the move towards the development and resulting dialogue of notions of an *Australian* "literary canon" took hold, between stakeholders both inside and outside of the academy. It is a divide that still fuels the power struggles and debates about the essay, and literature, today.

Utilising the theories and methodologies offered in earlier chapters, a critical analysis of *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008 is presented in Chapter 5. Here the various claims and approaches of the four editors, Peter Craven, Robert Dessaix, Drusilla Modjeska and David Marr, have been examined, and the kinds of essays and essayists published, analysed. Based on Swales's (1990) definitional cluster approach, I identified six categories, or sub-genres, of the essay in *The Best Australian Essays*: personal essays, critical essays, literary reportage, politically radical essays, science/nature/travel essays, and auto/biographical essays. For each of these sub-genres a close analysis has been presented utilising the various methodological approaches and historical and theoretical frameworks of Chapters 1-4.

The identification of sub-genres within *The Best Australian Essays,* and the close analyses of individual essays texts from the collections, allow for informed conclusions to be drawn about the kinds of essays the editors and publishers of the series have sought to make available to the reading public. The findings of this analysis have revealed that of all the essays published in *The Best Australian Essays*, the critical essay is the dominant *type*. Interestingly, and in keeping with the often-espoused "uncertain nature" of the essay, of all the sub-genres, this is the essay which allows for the greatest flexibility in approach and, therefore, outcome. In this sense, we are less able to pin down a style of essay writing that might be considered distinctly Australian (the discussions in Chapter 3 have shown that style is not an indication of genre), but we can see a consistency of purpose and reader expectation in these essays.

The critical essay, the most published Australian essay, is distinctly concerned with literary/historical/cultural events from which informed critique and opinion, based on apparent expertise, are offered. The critical essay can be personal, literary, thesis-support driven or a combination of all three; and may use logos, ethos and/or narrative to persuade. While we do see other sub-genres take on greater prominence under the varying editorial choices (we see an increase in the number of personal essays published under Dessaix and, similarly, more auto/biography under Marr), the critical essay has dominated all of the anthologies from 2000-2008. There lies in this notion, however, something of a contradiction which sees an articulated longing – most obviously in the ruminations of *The Best Australian Essays* editors – for an ideal or 'utopian' form. This form, usually associated with that of Montaigne, is personal, self-reflexive, sceptical, contemplative, and open. For many, then, the personal essay is the essay *par excellence*. While the critical essay may utilise a personal style, the purpose (as an indicator of genre, or in this case, sub-genre) of the personal essay and the critical essay differ markedly. In the simplest of terms, if we may essentialise for a moment, the use of the personal 'I' (as it is appropriated in the critical essay) does not result in an exemplar of the personal essay.

While the notion of "personal" pervades a great deal of the understanding and dialogue surrounding the essay, its presence in the essay form is not guaranteed. Indeed, a good number of the essays published in *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008 were impersonal. Ultimately, flexibility of form allows for such deviations away from notions of the 'ideal', though such deviations are rarely considered exemplary – indeed often such texts are viewed less as an essay, and more as an article. That the personal essay is not, despite acknowledgment of its literary value by the editors, the dominant form in *The Best Australian Essays,* signals perhaps a lack of practitioners of the personal essay in this country, and some reservation about the want/ability of the Australian public to accept the project undertaken by the personal essayist.

There can be no doubt that the essay is a highly flexible, adaptive and subsequently contentious genre, acting and acted upon within, on and by the communities in which the essay, as a social text, circulates. From the research and findings presented in this project, some final conclusions can be drawn about the status of the contemporary Australian essay, and the influence particular institutions have had on the genre and its presence in the national, public sphere. However, before we move onto these conclusions, it is important to note that the end of this project does not signal the end of a dialogue, rather it opens up opportunities for other work, other conversations, other studies. The following section considers the kinds of future conversations to which the work of this project points.

The journey continues: possibilities for further research

The journey of this project may end here, with this chapter, but it is an ending that is by no means finite. As this monograph has sought to map the contemporary Australian essay through nine *The Best Australian Essays* anthologies, there have surfaced, along the way, gaps in the map that this journey has been unable to traverse and fill. These are, then, the possibilities and directions for further research. Similarly, along the road – so to speak – other destinations of interest have emerged, ones that are linked to the work undertaken here but are quite removed from the subject of the

contemporary Australian essay. Six areas for possible further study are outlined below. This list is not exhaustive, but does suggest the need for, and value of, continued scholarly dialogue and research on the essay.

1. In the discussions of the preceding chapters, the importance of the reader as meaning maker in the textual transaction has been reiterated. Contemporary literary theory values highly the role of the reader, suggesting that while the text points to preferred kinds of reading, it is the reader and the context of reading that will ultimately determine the outcome of the reading act. It has been beyond the scope of this project to analyse reader's responses to the Australian essay texts, and certainly this would prove to be an interesting and worthwhile research project. In this regard it would also be useful to measure the ways in which *The Best Australian Essays* and other 'performative' texts (Carter's 2001 term) are consumed within the previously discussed notions of a 'lifestyle culture' and the influence of such on the reading act. Of particular interest, in this regard, is the extent to which the essay text, as a possible ethical artefact, is undermined (if at all) by the aesthetic and 'good taste' value associated with it.

2. Given the change of editors and consequently, editorial choices, in 2004, 2006 and 2008 in *The Best Australian Essays*, it will be interesting to track the future developments of the series and the continued role of Black Inc in publishing Australian essays and essayists. Undoubtedly, Black Inc has set out in the past decade a very specific publishing agenda, which sees the essay as a key genre and brand in its line-up of publications. Since Black Inc began publishing *The Monthly* in 2005, the magazine has not only become commercially viable, evidenced by its continued publication, but also, rather unsurprisingly, as the principal source of essays for *The Best Australian Essays*. One would hope that the value of *The Best Australian Essays*, as apparently representative – in publishing a broad cross section of essayists, from varied publications, demonstrating varied approaches on varied subject matters – of the *best* the nation has to offer, does not become undermined by a blatant form of nepotism. It would be sad to see the series diminish from a collection of best

Australian essays to one of best *Monthly* essays, despite the value and success of the magazine.

3. In the introduction to *The Best Australian Essays* 1998, Craven admits that the collection 'manifestly follows' the path set out in *Best American Essays*. A decade on, with the Australian 'best of' clearly setting its own course, a comparative analysis between *The Best Australian Essays* and *The Best American Essays* collections would arguably prove to be an interesting measure of the apparent cultural and national differences and/or similarities of such an intrinsically social set of texts.

4. I have argued in this project the value of considering the essay and all its manifestations within a varied methodological and theoretical framework. Swales's definitional cluster approach has been particularly useful in identifying, meaningfully, specific instances of genre. With this in mind, and considering Lopate's (1995) assertion that Montaigne's first book of essays were 'relatively impersonal' (p. 44), arguably there would be value in a close analysis of Montaigne's oeuvre, utilising a framework like that implemented here. Given that Montaigne is heralded as the father of the essay, and quite specifically the *personal* essay, an analysis based on genre and rhetoric as a means for marking consistencies and divergences in his work would be both interesting and provide an important addition to scholarly work on the essay.

5. In Chapter 3 'Conceptual and theoretical frames for analysing and interpreting the essay', Hesse's (1989) work on narrative and rhetoric was examined. For Hesse there lies within stories an inherent persuasive value. For those essays in which story is evoked as part of its form, this 'story-like' (Hesse's term) nature acts as an important persuasive element. I would further suggest, that the story also holds great cognitive potential. Given that we see story utilised in a number of the essays analysed for this project, I think its role in the essay as a persuasive and cognitive tool, is an area of great interest and value to the further study of the essay genre. Shah (2008) evokes the value of story when he writes

> For my father there was no sharper way to understand a country than by listening to their stories... The tales worked in a special way, he said, diverting the mind

> while passing on a kind of inner knowledge. Listen to the stories, he would repeat again and again, and they would act like and instruction manual to the world... My father never told us how the stories worked. He didn't reveal the layers, the nuggets of information, the fragments of truth and fantasy. He didn't need to – because, given the right conditions, the stories activated, sowing themselves. (pp. 9-10)

6. While this project has been quite specifically concerned with the essay located in *The Best Australian Essays* collections, other publications, specifically the *ABR*, which publishes in each edition the 'LaTrobe University Essay' and presents the annual Calibre Prize for most outstanding essay, offer up other sites for pursuing examples of the contemporary Australian essay. As such there are possibilities to extend the analysis of the contemporary Australian essay beyond reach and strategic position of Black Inc.

7. As has been intimated a number of times throughout this project, there is an opportunity for significant further research on the history of the essay in Australia. There is much to be gained from the compilation of a detailed historical record of essayists and essay publications (most notably the newspaper in the nineteenth century and the literary magazines in the mid-twentieth century) throughout Australia's literary and publishing history. Such records exist in the English tradition (see, for example, Watson M.R. 1956, *Magazine Serials and the Essay Tradition*, Louisiana State University Press), and an Australian equivalent would be a useful addition to scholarly work on the essay, and as a further resource to accompany national essay anthologies such as those examined in this project.

Concluding notes on the journey

The notion of an annual *The Best Australian Essays* anthology seems to promise, at least superficially, something of a simple, unproblematic collection of exemplary Australian essays. On one level this idea rings true – *The Best Australian Essays* is just one editor's view of good writing that ostensibly fits their notion of the essay genre. Similarly then,

the continued publication of *The Best Australian Essays* suggests a market that is interested in the kind of 'aesthetic' and 'ethical' nonfiction, both as a literary and lifestyle product, offered by these anthologies. Yet in the overt declaration of genre, these books are linked to a complex history of ideology, theory, nomenclature, culture, style, appropriation, publishing, marketing and consumerism. *The Best Australian Essays* are therefore highly complex.

The Best Australian Essays fits the 'lifestyle', 'good taste' product profile – simple, sexy covers (imagine the decorative appeal of brightly coloured spines from consecutive collections lined-up on the bookshelf); aesthetic and topical texts – popular thinkers and speakers writing for ethical action and aesthetic pleasure; all in time for Christmas. And yet two things are highlighted in this contemporary positioning of the essay, both of which are inextricably linked: firstly, the audience for the essay has not really changed (consider the rising middle class of the eighteenth century for whom the essay was something of a 'moral' guide); and secondly, the essay often presents ethical debate as an aesthetic, literary artefact which acts simultaneously as the aforementioned 'good taste', 'lifestyle' *product*. This latter point is an important one. For the essay to hold any relevance in our contemporary culture, it must function as part of the consumer market in which such artefacts exist and circulate. In the very least then a collection such as *The Best Australian Essays* must hold some market appeal. The further the reach of such a text, the greater potential for both ethical action and aesthetic pleasure both inside (upon reading) and outside (efferent reading) the text. Yet, problematically, there is also, in this scenario, the possibility that as a 'good-taste' Christmas gift, for example, the currency of the ethical debate may be undermined.

Over the past decade, and most notably in the last five years, the essay in Australia has become something of a *brand* of Black Inc, as it has seemingly consciously sought to publish and make visible the essay in texts such as *The Best Australian Essays*, *The Monthly*, *Quarterly Essay*, and *Reflected Light: La Trobe Essays*. So too, the essayists published in these texts have become closely linked with Black Inc.

In the past nine *The Best Australian Essays*, 194 individual essayists have been published. Of these, 31 appear regularly – that is these essayists have been published 3 times or more. In Chapter 3 Davis's (1999) position on an Australian public intellectual/essay coterie was reviewed. He lists 13 members of his 'coterie'. Of these members, 3 are regularly published in *The Best Australian Essays* – Robert Manne 8 times, Helen Garner 6 times, and Kerryn Goldsworthy 3 times. All of *The Best Australian Essays* editors, with the exception of David Marr, are also implicated in this coterie. While the individuals in Davis's coterie continue to write, publish and review essays, there is arguably a good cross section of essayists (and essays) appearing in *The Best Australian Essays*. Though regular contributors may be considered as part of a national essay coterie, there is an argument to be made that this is hardly a situation restricted to Australia and or the essay genre.

Yet this notion of a coterie is interesting in publishing terms, because Black Inc certainly has something of a stronghold on the essay in Australia and a commercial relationship with many of its published essayists – in particular Robert Manne who has 6 books with Black Inc. Other *The Best Australian Essays* essayists who have books published with Black Inc include Peter Rose, Anne-Marie Priest, Mungo MacCullum, John Martinkus, Cameron Forbes, Gideon Haigh, Raimond Gaita, Craig Sherborne, Nicolas Rothwell, Les Murray, Robert Drewe, Simon Leys/Pierre Ryckmans, Judith Brett and Amanda Lohery. Of the 194 essayists published in *The Best Australian Essays* 2000-2008, 52 have also been published in *The Monthly*. Similarly, of the 30 *Quarterly Essays* published by Black Inc, 19 of the essayists have also appeared in *The Best Australian Essays*. Of Davis's (1999) coterie then, only Morag Fraser, Peter Steele and Luke Slattery appear to have no ties to Black Inc.

Prior to the publication of *The Best Australian Essays*, very few texts, or publishers, in Australia could be seen to be staking such an overt claim for the essay, as an important and indeed marketable genre. It is, therefore, understandable that Black Inc would seek commercial relationships with those writing in the area for which, arguably, they are seeking to brand as their own. In this way, the Australian essay and Black Inc have become somewhat synonymous.

With the increased visibility of the essay, there have consequently been claims that it is experiencing a twenty-first century renaissance (Carter 2001, Modjeska 2007). Equally, there are claims that the essay is undervalued in Australia and not given adequate status; thus, it is not in resurgence but rather, decline (Salusinszky 2005, Dessaix 2004). Or, alternatively, there are those who think that the essay is on the brink of resurgence (Modjeska 2006, Carey 2008). Ironically, all arguments serve the same purpose – as an entry point into a dialogue about the essay, one that ultimately helps to promote the genre and its texts. This perhaps explains why four of the citations above are found in the introduction to various *The Best Australian Essays* (Craven 2001, Dessaix 2004, Modjeska 2006 & 2007).

What these contradictions and divergences indicate is a continued and necessary dialogue about genre and our understanding of the production and consumption of texts, revealing, we hope, something about the nature of our own culture and ways of being. To some extent this notion helps keep alive the dialogue seemingly now inherent in the essay – one in which the presentation of the essay as form, always carries with it an attempt at articulating what the essay actually is.

Within all of this, however, there is an argument to be made that the term "essay" has ceased to be – as far literary criticism is concerned, but for the broader reading public also – a sufficiently meaningful label. Indeed, my own anecdotal evidence goes some way to supporting this – virtually every person I have spoken to about this project outside of academia, and even some within, have asked: "What *is* an essay?" To which, of course, there is no easy answer. The assertion that the essay is a short to medium length nonfiction (though not always) written (though not always) text, highly flexible, able to take on various forms and styles with a multiplicity of potential purposes, does not provide the would be-reader with a great deal of information as to what to expect – except maybe, anything between 1000 and 20 000 words.

The history of the essay shows it is a genre that is readily adaptable, and adapted, by the cultural movements of particular times and groups. It is, perhaps, the

quintessential social text. In trying to gain a firm understanding of the essay, and all that the label might imply, therefore, we are perhaps better off considering the essay in terms of its historical position – the eighteenth century English essay, for example – or by sub-genre.

I am by no means suggesting that the nomenclature of essay be obliterated, but surely many of the debates about inclusions, and indeed exclusions, within the genre code would be reconciled if we come to accept that the term essay has and will continue to be applied to various, often disparate, texts. What we see in much of the literature about the essay is a preferencing of the personal essay project above other kinds, with the resulting implication, often intentional, that other essay types are less valuable kinds of essays.

The value and potential of the personal essay is not in question here. What I do question, however, is the value of considering the personal essay and all other, non-personal essays, within the same framework – as either "in" or "out". What I think this project shows is that given its condition as a highly flexible form, appropriated in many ways, discussions of the essay must be similarly open and flexible. Heilker (2006), having considered his oftentimes uneasy relationship with the personal essay and other essay types over a period of twenty years, suggests that

> we should see the essay and the thesis-driven article not as mutually exclusive entities but as being at two ends of a continuum and that we need to start mapping out the spaces between the poles (2006, p. 205)

I would argue that this project, and specifically the analysis of *Best Australian Essays,* reveals less of two distinct poles on a continuum – I do not think it would be possible to definitively locate the sub-genres identified in Chapter 5 in such a linear way, for example – but rather that the essays in the '*Best of*' series circle around each other, perhaps cross paths, blend together, or remain completely separate. While this project is absolutely concerned with 'mapping the spaces between', here the spaces are not viewed as between two apparent polar opposites on a continuum, but rather, as more imprecise, fluid spaces. We might, therefore, conclude that Heilker (2006) is

concerned less with the identification of instances of genre and more with the presence of a particular *style*. His project and this one are not necessarily incongruent, however; rather, the points of reference differ. The value of Heilker's assertion lies in the notion that we cannot simply dismiss texts that stray away from the rubric of the personal essay, because they are all around, and are, therefore, important cultural artefacts. This, therefore, supports the analysis undertaken in this project – one which views the essay historically, culturally and contextually, within a framework of genre theory (which looks beyond style) and rhetorical analysis.

Interestingly, Heilker (2006) apparently still associates the nomenclature of essay quite exclusively with the personal. In one sense this is a minor quibble, yet it is one, I suspect, that fuels the kinds of debates in Australia about inclusions and exclusions relative to the genre that we have seen between members of the academy and the so-called amateurs. The essay means many things (or quite a specific thing) to many people. Indeed, as this project has consistently shown, the essay, not just in Australia, but since its very conception, has been entangled in disputes and questions of nomenclature.

Perhaps more so than any other genre, the essay carries with it the need to constantly and consistently reiterate its history and stylistic, political, philosophical and cognitive potential. To be sure, the story of the essay (still) trying to discover itself is an interesting one; it is also one which has become almost as important to the genre as the essay texts themselves. Where the essay continues to fit in Australian writing and reading culture is clearly an evolving activity: an exercise in balancing and testing the relationship between the public and the personal. How we think and talk about such activities will be determined by the histories of the essay and our literary culture(s) and, importantly, by the possibilities offered up in the contemporary essays made available to the Australian reading public. For the essay enthusiast, it would certainly seem that interesting times lay ahead.

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Appendices

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