

No Bishop bowling. There are all kinds of *types* here: gamesters, gamesters' beadsmen (praying for bowlers!), gamblers, losers. Earle writes, "It is the best discovery of humours, especially in the losers, where you have fine variety of impatience, whilst some fret, some rail, some swear, and others more ridiculously comfort themselves with philosophy." It's a sweaty, shilly, place full of high and low, base motives, "bodies into such strange flexures." This is, in other words, a place much like the bowling alleys I grew up with in Brooklyn. It's also a space that sounds very much like the essay to me: embodied, open to philosophy, even if absurd, in the realm of "the mistress fortune." And as such it is, in its narrow confines, "the best sport" and "the best discovery of humours." Earle was speaking of bowling, I mean: the essay. Six of one.

VOLUPTUOUSLY,
EXPANSIVELY, HISTORICALLY,
CONTRADICTORILY

Essaying the Interview with
David Lazar and Mary Cappello

MARY CAPPELLO: You open your new collection of essays with a wonderfully suggestive epigraph from Terence: "That is true wisdom, to know how to alter one's mind when occasion demands it." Of course the word *occasion* and *occasional* function in variously meditative ways in your collection, and I don't want this question to serve as a spoiler, but I was curious to hear your thoughts on the difference between being what used to be known (and maybe still is) as an "occasional poet" and how the idea of the occasion(al) figures (differently) for you in these essays or in the history of the essay. Mainly, I'm struck by the way the Terrence epigraph might speak to the utter adaptability of the essay form and therefore—here's my question—of the essayist? What might that mean for you?

DAVID LAZAR: Thanks for this question, Mary, because it's rather central for me. The occasional poet, say in the laureate sense (Larkin turned down the laureateship because, among other things, he couldn't imagine

writing “occasional poems”) hews to an event, current or celebrated, of public import. The poem may veer to more personal moments, but it’s essentially a public form, and its themes shoot larger rather than smaller. The occasion in the essay is frequently quite different. Certainly, large themes and events may come into play. One hopes they do. But more often than not, essayists are moved to write by events, ideas, problems, questions, coincidences, conundrums . . . that are smaller and closer to home. Because the voice in the essay is so often intimate, we like to know fairly early on why it is the essayist is writing the essay, what brought her here, in short what the “occasion” of the essay is, what stirred her to write. And I divide the occasion into two crude categories, “ostensible” and “actual.” The actual occasion might be there right from the beginning, upfront. But it also might be discovered; it might be hidden from us, the way dreamwork hides our deeper anxieties, and the “ostensible” occasion, which got us writing, allowed us to wade in to where we needed to go to find our “real,” or at least more necessary, subject. So, this is a partial response to my invocation of Terence. The other part is simply the necessity of being able to think and change one’s mind while writing an essay. In fact, it’s impossible to write essays without being able to do this. Let me go further: I can’t imagine wanting to write essays unless this is an essential part of your makeup: the desire to change something in yourself, to move it off the mark, unsettle it. When I begin an essay, I have a rough idea of the subject and the occasion (the two might merge or overlap) and perhaps a few things I think I might want to say at some point, some pieces of narrative I think might be useful. But then when writing, I might find that the essay needs to be broken up in a certain way (which I do very selectively) or that my original idea was just a hedge or that some of the thoughts at the beginning of the essay were timid and that I need to go much further or that they were reckless and I need to pull back. If you look at the Montaignian essay or the Hazlittian essay, you find coils of intensity. Part of my resistance to the subgeneric categorization of the essay (segmented essay, ekphrastic essay [aren’t all essays ekphrastic?], lyric essay), in addition to the fact that they’re just academic

inventions of creative writing programs that are mimicking the academic development of poetry, is that it stifles the ability of students to do what they most need to do: allow their minds to voluptuously, expansively, historically, and contradictorily develop a sense of what they might say in an essay and then figure out how to write stunning sentences to speak them. The second part is hard to teach. I mean, you can always do forms.

Let me add that where the occasion is concerned, you and I both seem to be perennially taken by, swept up a bit by, intensities of coincidence. In fact, we met under auspiciously coincidental circumstances, you writing to me before we’d ever met on the morning after I had ordered your book *Awkward: A Detour*. So, you return to what I might call “the frisson of circumstance” a lot. Why do you think we do this, Mary? Is it just that we’re these meaning-making machines without much spiritual guidance, speaking for myself, so when we bump into people we know in Oshkosh or the number 72 repeats itself on an excessive number of billboards or we meet a woman with the same name as our childhood crushes, we have find something in it? Accident becomes a kind of inscrutable and necessary principle? Oh, one more thing: I had just reread what you wrote about the bezoar in your newest book, *Swallow: Foreign Bodies, Their Ingestion, Inspiration, and the Curious Doctor Who Extracted Them*, and I was walking down the street with Delmore (my son) and he started spontaneously talking about bezoars. What are the odds?

MC: Hmmm . . . let me riff a little on *occasion* with you first. I hear you saying that the occasion is the spur, ground, impetus, maybe the essay’s condition of possibility. Or what used to be called its “inspiration” but less grand, more ordinary. That the occasion changes—it needn’t be adhered to; it can be left behind: like the flame’s starter, it’s easily evaporated. Stevens maybe concurs with you when he writes: “The poem is the cry of its occasion / Part of the res itself and not about it.” Maybe the essay’s occasion is akin to what Freud calls the dream’s navel—the place where it originates but that is ever out of view and can’t be gotten to the bottom of . . . it’s what compels and propels the writing but remains outside the realm of interpretability.

David, you got me going to the OED, where I discover that Occasio is the Roman equivalent of the Greek personification of opportunity, Caerus or Kaerus, and both are represented—I love this—as having a long forelock at the front of the head while bald at the back of the head. Which sort of makes *occasion* punk. Apparently, the idea was that opportunity is fleeting, so you're supposed to grab it while you can; if you miss it, you're left grasping at nothingness.

Somewhere the word *occidere* figures in its etymology as well—that the occasion is that which falls, without befalling one: I mean it's a kind of happy accident. To essay might require that one give oneself more fully over to chance and might explain our shared penchant for coincidence: I think it has to do with a willingness to make oneself susceptible, to stay open to being found by a subject rather than go in search of one. Like all good concepts, it's really polyvalent. For me the draw of coincidence is its kinship with synchronicity and simultaneity rather than diachronicity or linearity. It's the contradiction of all that happens side by side that interests me more than causes and their effects.

At the same time, sure, I think that we're drawn to coincidence as a way of dealing with our own traumas: it's a way of protecting oneself from loss and chaos. (I wrote about this in an essay called "Shadows in the Garden" on the various forms of grief modeled to me by my Italian American family.) Our aptitude for coincidence helps us to feel surprised and consoled simultaneously. I think it makes the world less lonely seeming: it says, "The feeling is mutual." Coincidences as mutualities. I suppose they're in the realm of what I call "weird shit": they're interruptions that also seal things up. Of course, as a perceptual mode, what we're talking about also treads a fine line between delusional thinking and metaphor making.

A most beautiful and uncanny meditation on coincidence is Lawrence Weschler's *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences*, which I'm sure you know. And what you're saying about the failure of our essayistic categories might resonate with Michael Theune's *Structure and Surprise: Engaging Poetic Turns*, in which he proposes an alternative to the age-old taxonomies of poetic forms.

I remember the first time I read the title essay of your collection, "Occasional Desire," in your anthology *The Truth in Nonfiction*. I was so grateful for the way you were asking me to think about the essay and the friction between desire and memory therein, the way that desire challenges memory's narrative complacencies, as you might put it; and I was grateful for your willingness to historicize current practices so nimbly and instructively—you put it so succinctly when you suggest an essayist needs literary knowledge and knowledge of the world. I got hooked on your work starting with this essay on the essay, and then, when I read the title essay in your *Body of Brooklyn*, I felt haunted by the places it was willing to go—really into realms we might consider taboo, some dark underside of things, of life, and yet what were you dealing with but the place we all live but don't want to admit into language or consciousness. You were writing, in particular, about being a boy who had been fat or who had been thin and attendant sexual anxieties and identifications, including identifications with the feminine. I wondered if you might talk about what feels like a psychoanalytic logic that shapes some of your work (I'm thinking especially of the essay on "Dating" in the new collection). Drawing upon some of your own compelling poles and zones, how do you gauge the difference between "I and one" in your work? Between "solitary confinement and writerly solidarity"? Between "self-knowing and self-analysis"?

DL: Hey, stop being so interesting. Oh, I know, you can't help it. Now, wait a minute, protecting ourselves from loss and trauma? Did I get off at the wrong bus stop? I know what you mean, our always failing attempts at trying. I'm always alluding to Freud's navel too. Images of the master on a Viennese sunscape. To be serious: in what gets us started, some subconscious sense of more dangerous, yes, opportunities. It's like going for a walk and not avoiding the chasms in your path. You need to fall into them. And then you need to get out. Finding them, falling, and getting out are where an essay's living quality survives. I'm speaking of a certain kind of essay, of course—the essay where self-understanding is highlighted in some way, which tends to be the kind of essay I write—what I call a very

psychodynamic process for the most part. As for taboo, yes, it's important for me to "speak the thing that shouldn't be spoken about" from time to time. Don't you think that's thrilling? Don't you think that's fun? Don't you find your ten-year-old self sitting in the corner waiting for your mom to find out? Part of me writes against the family injunction not to speak outside the family and simply to not be afraid to say things. As in: there, that wasn't so bad, was it?

To respond to your last few questions: we all spend a lot of time stuck in our heads, and we think all kinds of crazy things. I experience my own sense of self, I think—what I also call "sensibility," which is a word I'd like to hear you muse about—very intensely, sometimes pleasurably, and often burdensomely. Part of the sport of writing essays, and the great essayists—Woolf, Baldwin, Hazlitt, Chesterton, etc.—all knew this, is how and when to generalize. One can't be afraid to make a general statement about the world, to try to assume that many others feel the way that one does. By the same token, you're also frequently expressing an individual, personal, even at times a neurotic point of view about the world or some small piece of it. In addition, we have sensibilities (and here I feel my Jamesian side itching to come out) that want to come out and dance around the room and show off their bright affectations with all due condescension (I'm channeling James). So, I've used four different pronouns in the last four sentences. And the first person wasn't necessarily the one in a most personal voice. Nor do I think it should be eschewed. The difference between pronouns is all in the tone, the ballast of context. You can have a warm *one* or a cold *I*. Let me tell you (he says in his best Brooklyn accent).

I do think when I am speaking to myself in the essays you refer to, it's never, and this is a severe issue for me, just for the sake of my own self-analysis. The idea of that makes me queasy. What makes essay writing so difficult is the razor edge between what we consider "truth" in some form—the search for it, honesty's *machine*—and performance, theatricality, craft, poetry, persona, revision. I use my self-analysis to try to get to something beyond myself. In the "On Dating" essay I wanted to use myself as a kind of factotum for the way we construct narrative. And ask the readers

to think about how self-serving they are. I tried to seduce the reader with amusement before pulling the carpet out from under myself. I don't know if it worked. As fascinating as I am, I want my readers to ultimately think about other things. That may be the difference between an autobiographical essayist and a familiar essayist. I'm not sure I've answered your questions. I must lie down. The chaise. Quick, bring me the chaise. Or a folding chair.

Better. As a plug, I did want to mention that I'm a Lawrence Weschler fan too. *Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences* and *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders*.

One of the haunting things about *Swallow* is the idea of epistemogenesis that you . . . bring up. "Desire and knowledge are forever linked." Yes, *desire* for me is one of the sacred words, and I mean desire in all its nuances. The book itself performs the function of taking in and bringing forth. And one of our oldest stories (epistemogenesis?) is about eating what we're not supposed to eat. But you bring out the centrality of mouth and throat. It's a polymorphous book! And I felt a little afraid after reading it, as though I were going to swallow something bad. Of course I would have this reaction. Did you find yourself checking your plate to make sure it was safe? Did all this work make you more self-conscious about your apparatus, or has it blissfully faded?

MC: You say conundrums, I say conundra, but as we know from one of our favorite musicals, difference fuels desire rather than cancels it. I never said I was interested in Freud's navel. If I were asked to think about Freud's body, it's his jaw that would interest me most and the painful fact that the inventor of the talking cure had to insert and remove a prosthetic device in order to talk, the result of a horrible cancer of the jaw and attendant surgeries.

As for interest, it's a subject I'm very much interested in. I mean, I'm not any more interesting than the next person, but I am interested. I've been wanting to write a collection of essays on the subject of interest—and aversion—and love, inspired by a number of post-*Swallow* encounters and friendships, uncanny discoveries, and yes, more serendipities. These range from being found unexpectedly by the daughter of a boy whose unusually

ghastly case study I deal with in the book and the circumstances of that connection; to discovering medical films and home movies in the home of [Dr. Chevalier] Jackson's great-grandson; to being given a tour of the cemetery he is buried in in a hearse by a historian who is also a funeral director there; to finding a ninety-three-year-old woman who worked in his clinics as a voice pathologist who lives in a retirement home with the mother of a friend of mine and who enjoyed a second career as an experimental writer; to being contacted by a woman who was bequeathed the clinic demonstration doll: the story of the medical mannequin, named "Michelle," and its maker and the uses to which she was put could yield a book in itself.

Essayists, I think, at any rate, are people who are interested.

I'm intrigued by the image you invoke of essaying as a chasm we fall into and have to find our way out of. I don't find myself trying to get out of the chasms when I write; I think I'm trying to invent a new way of being inside of the chasm. I'm not sure I ever get out; the writing is just a different way of moving around à la Barthes by Barthes: "Writing is that play by which I turn around as well as I can in a narrow place: I am wedged in, I struggle between the hysteria necessary to write and the image-repertoire which oversees, controls, purifies, banalizes, codifies, corrects, imposes the focus (and the vision) of a social communication."

Your earlier set of adverbs says it all, I think—I'd love to adopt them as an adverbial mantra for essaying: "voluptuously, expansively, historically, and contradictorily." They remind me that the sort of nonfiction we're hoping to teach and write is neither disposable nor a means to an end nor a way of filling time (as in airplane reading): it's a writing that incites a new way of being in time.

Where *sensibility* is concerned, I don't take the term to be equivalent to personality or idiosyncrasies or the ego's flourishes and therefore the thing we might want, à la Eliot, to escape when we write. The cultivation of a sensibility is to my mind a lifelong pursuit, and it's not reducible to style per se. It's our way of making sense out of sentience, the place where our being both sensate and sense-making creatures meets. It has an ethical dimension; it treats writing as a response-ability by which we might come

to feel thoughts and think feelings. In my classes I oppose the cultivation of a sensibility with a notion students may have that a writing class can give them a bag of tricks, or how-tos, to take away with them. Instead, I try to foster an atmosphere for helping them to cultivate a sensibility.

In *Swallow* desire meets knowledge in so many ways: Jackson is such a complexly desiring being and one who contributes vast new forms of knowledge to the history of medicine. Human beings originally come to know the world through our mouths, until we in some sense literally replace the things in our mouths with words-as-things in our mouths. The human swallow is uniquely precarious and dependent upon a suite of voluntary and autonomic movements in sync: the proximity of airway and food way is marvelous and bizarre and vulnerable making (thanks to our descended larynx, an effect of our evolution as bipeds). And the mouth has got to be the place in the body with the most going on: breath, speech, appetite, desire, language, voice.

I don't know if working on *Swallow* made me more self-conscious of the apparatus or fearful of all of the ways it might cease to work, as you point out. My father treated the object world as a constant possible threat—always warning us that we had to be careful not to swallow things—so maybe I was already self-conscious, and the book was my antidote! But Jackson's foreign body collection pointed up the extent to which we are essentially porous. I seem to have a fascination with incorporation and capaciousness—the fundamental question of how the world comes to withstand us and we it (I'm paraphrasing Adam Phillips here). But I'm also interested in things that appear where they're not supposed to (thus, the draw of the incongruousness of foreign bodies in a human gullet). *Swallow* is thus not so far from the preoccupations of *Awkward*: with adaptation, fit, the cockeyed. What happens when we cross thresholds, either via the mixing of literary genres or in real life? Whether I'm a working-class student at a high falutin' college or a lesbian in a heterosexist world, I'm hopeful not to sacrifice all that is alien to a feeling of "home."

I loved your essay on the journey—emotional, physical, literary, spiritual—to meet M. F. K. Fisher. I wonder if we might talk about the pleasures

and challenges of following a biographical subject, dead or alive, to the extent we have both done this in our work. The ways in which one is never merely an amanuensis even when one finds oneself taking dictation. I guess if we put M. F. K. Fisher and Chevalier Jackson side by side, we could say we've also both written about "appetite," albeit from very different directions. Speaking of biography, though, I have a biographical question for you: how did you decide to go to Philip Larkin's funeral?

DL: I'll work backward, since working forward is frequently so laborious. Plus, we know where it gets us. More about coincidence and convergence really, Mary. I had been walking around Regents Park memorizing Larkin poems. I would walk from Chalk Farm, where I was living, past Primrose Hill over to the park, each day putting more and more of a poem to mind. "Home Is So Sad," "Talking in Bed," "This Be the Verse," "Aubade." It wasn't my first flush of Larkin. I actually remember where we met. I was seventeen and in the poetry section of the NYU bookstore. And I picked up *The North Ship*. I bought it and then the other slim Faber volumes. In any case he died when I was living there, and there was a little ad in the *Times* (of London) saying if one wanted tickets to his service at Westminster, one should write to the rector. And I thought immediately, "Why would anyone not go to Philip Larkin's service?" I also thought it was pretty strange to have to get a ticket. I mean, as a Jew I've had to deal with the lifelong anomaly of needing a ticket to attend services for the most solemn day of the year. But a funeral ticket was right up there for a listing in *The Sacred and the Profane* (which I've always thought would be the best ever soap opera title). I've written about the service elsewhere, so I don't want to belabor that, but realizing I was sitting on T. S. Eliot ("teach us to sit still?") was quite a shock.

I had two other very strange conjunctions that year that have stayed with me. One was that I was reading Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station*, which someone in London had told me about, and she, too, had died. Smart was quite well-known in London, still not very much in the States, unfortunately, because *Grand Central* is an astonishing book, a lyrical hybrid decades ahead of its time. Intensely moving, politically messy. I

love it. Kind of impossible to categorize. In any case it's been an important book to me. It's very courageous.

And for my third—there must be a third—in this series, I was taking myself on a little weekend holiday to Cornwall, chugging along on the train, and reading Woolf's *Between the Acts* for the first time. One of the things that's marvelous about traveling is how we remember what we've read and where. I read Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook* in Castelfranco di Sopra in Italy in 1987. I also, strangely enough, remember reading Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark* in Latvia in 1978. I read *Ulysses* in a small Polish café in London in 1986 . . . etc. I was reading *Between the Acts* on my way to my little holiday, and Woolf mentioned this little regional town in, what must it have been, Dorset? Or the edges of Dorset? And I looked up, and I was there. We had stopped, and I was there, at the station of that town. It was the purest experience of the uncanny I've ever had. Because I was reading because I was traveling because I suppose I wanted to be somewhere else, I was. If I had it to do all over again, I would have gotten off the train. But I was very happy. I was in a kind of stunned happiness. But no, it was a bit more delicate than that.

About M. F. K.—thanks, Mary. Yes, we both became interested in rather formidable characters. Both, too, rather escapable in different ways. I think to convey what's fascinating about one's subject, you have to become a little obsessed with them. Now, our cases are different in that you summoned an intense amount of remarkable research into Chevalier Jackson and performed a kind of psychobiography, along with essaying the nature of swallowing as metaphor and giving us surgical history, etc. But it's that drive that keeps right there with you throughout *Swallow*, wondering, what is this guy all about? What makes it doubly interesting, though, for a reader and as a work of nonfiction literature, is that *you* become this intense literary persona, not just some anonymous narrator, so we're also asking, what is this woman all about? Of course, your readers already know that, but I mean for a reader coming to your work, to this book, cold. Then, I think, with a biographical subject, we have to at some point, both in the work and within ourselves, start heading out of the maze. Don't you think?

With M. F. K. Fisher I had offers to do biographical work, and after editing the book on her and writing a bit about her, I figured it was time to look at other things. You don't want to turn into a cottage industry on your subject. I would have started getting bored. No matter how enthralled you are by your subject, there's a bit of burnout. You don't want to be married, after all, to your obsession. It starts to feel oppressive at some point . . . We're generalists, hummingbirds. Do you want to talk about that?

Also, I was really struck by what you wrote about "pica," "untoward hankerings of nature." I love that. And the connection, etymologically, to magpies. Magpie? That would be dessert, I suppose. Especially since the collecting of stray bits of information, the constant taking in of things, seems so much a writer's preoccupation, bordering on a disorder. We're all kind of suffering from pica, don't you think? I think that's where so much of *Swallow's* fascination comes from.

MC: Travel on foot or by train, movement, convergence, coincidence: it's such a beautiful recipe for essayism, and it reminds me of the work you are doing now in which you write (and photograph) from the position of a flaneur in your city of Chicago. Can that kind of creature still exist in the twenty-first century? You tell me he can and does! I'd love to hear your thoughts on this, and especially as they relate to that other means of transport—the telephone—in the essay "Calling for His Past," which opens your new collection, on (the now largely defunct) public telephone. I was moved by the way the essay was structured—almost like a piece of music—by way of carefully placed and choice snatches of the overheard: from the guy who forces you out of a phone booth with "Say good-bye!" to the mysterious note found in the phone booth, "Phil Abbate keeps calling for his past," and the wonderful line of Mrs. Gitmann, "I love all the fish in the ocean." I think of these moments as poetic distillates that leave you in the very interesting position of a very specific sort of essayist-receiver (telephonic pun intended). This made me wonder how your essaying (or anyone's essaying for that matter) might shift and change given the newer relationship to publicity and privacy since the advent of the portable phone, that

only seemingly private "cell." Eavesdropping seems less possible because people have become so indifferent to their being in a public space. Does the essay change once the "public telephone" is no more? Or when the line between the public telephone and the private telephone ceases to exist?

Are we generalist hummingbirds? Thanks for that rich image, David. It got me thinking of the hummingbirds that would arrive at my window this summer, directly next to my writing desk. (I know, it's scarily idyllic, but rest assured, the writing is never easy.) They never hold still for a picture, try as I might to picture them. They dart; they swoop upward and jet stream at odd angles, like Disney's Tinker Bell, and it's anybody's guess whether they are drawn to what's actually inside the flower or simply its color, its form: in that way their moves seem similar to our own. Sometimes, as I'd turn my head to watch one, it would pause and hover and directly face me as if to learn if I might be part geranium or just to give me the briefest encounter with hummingbird consciousness. An essayist is like a hummingbird in the way she moves from flower to flower, but I'd need a different bird for my own aesthetic because I place a high premium on dwelling (which I think is quite different from obsessing, even though the words are synonyms). This is why I'm not so eager to "get out" because I'm convinced that if we stay with a subject long enough and let it overtake us, it can become something else. I guess I'm after a kind of staying not to be confused with miring and more akin to transformation. *Awkward*, as you know, was based on a desire to sit with discomfort and see what becomes available as a result, rather than, in the age of 9/11, move on as quickly as possible from the disaster, forfeiting our capacity to understand it or to respond with care.

Staying with this idea of the essay's movement and the way we move, or pause, in the world, I'd love to see what might happen if writers of essays, reviewers of works of creative nonfiction, and essayists themselves suspended their use of the word *digression* for a while. I find the word utterly meaningless and inadequate to what essayistic *writing* is and does. Consequently, I'd love to hear more about this wondrous phrase you bring to Hazlitt and Lamb, *coils of intensity*. It's also interesting that we have a language for leaps, silences, associations, and appositions in poetry but

not in essays, even though this is what essays are also made of. This is one reason why I want to resist *digressive* as a descriptor for what essays do. I feel like we can afford to do better, but that would require our really lovingly attending to essayistic prose in order to find *a language for the shape* of what we're reading and hearing.

Digression is a misnomer because it privileges both a point (as singular vantage and aim) and a center. But essays at their best think like Gertrude Stein, and therein lies their pleasure and their difference—"act so that there is no use in a center," "aim less"—and embrace pointlessness: "I do not write in order to be right."

I think there's a big difference between digressing and wandering. Digression feels neurotic—a Poesque imp of the perverse?—whereas wandering takes courage, and it's also not the same as "changing the subject": it's a staying with the subject that requires that we approach it from numerous different pathways.

The linked essays book I mentioned earlier is, come to think of it, partly propelled by the difference between drifting and digressing. By the power of and difference between trance and daze and by the new relationships that become possible by moving adrift. Relatedly, I don't think of it at all as a sequel to *Swallow* (like a literal p.s.)—that would require that *Swallow* be a blockbuster, which, for better or worse, it certainly is not. I think of the book I want to call "Waylaid by Interest" as a segue: it doesn't follow from the previous book so much as it's a detour suggested by it; it moves out from it and on from it.

I say all this, and yet this is NOT the book I am currently composing. Right now I'm writing a book on mood and atmosphere [*Life Breaks In: A Mood Almanack*], tempted by the idea of a literary form that could approximate cloud formations. But here's where the hummingbird comes in again, I guess, because while I'm working on one book, there are always two or three others calling upon some part of my consciousness but that have to wait, and thus, again, that need for the more patient bird because it requires such immense patience to work on what is before one and all the

time that takes, all the while knowing we only get one lifetime and don't have "forever" at our disposal.

Like you with M. F. K. Fisher, I certainly did not wish to spend my life writing a biography of Chevalier Jackson, though the project could have easily demanded that—Jackson was a pack rat who lived to be ninety-three years old. If there is such a thing as a "definitive" biography, I guess *Swallow* could be considered a "suggestive" biography: I followed the paths of the things that Jackson's life and work, his autobiography, case histories, and most especially his cabinet of curiosity—the foreign body collection—suggested to me. But I based my meditations on a great deal of time spent in archives, in reading, interviews I carried out, and research, and I treated the materials I was privy to of his life and work and that of his patients with loving care (the medical case histories of other people I consider, in particular, a form of sacred document). I've written elsewhere of the biography as brick or doorstep, as extended Wikipedia article or attempts to make the mess of a life cohere, over and against another kind of biographical writing, deformed and gangly (à la Montaigne). Jackson himself was onto something when he wanted to orchestrate his autobiography in terms of three categories—"Physique," "Hobbies," and "Episodes"—rather than produce a chronological narrative. Much to the chagrin of his editors, he also shifted between the first and third person (not *one* but *he*). What they really wanted from him was a "success" story that moved simply and seamlessly from here to there, but he was a nonnarrative assembler through and through.

David, are there other biographical subjects who have inspired your interest or whom who are considering writing about since M. F. K. Fisher? And if so, what's the draw of communing with those other lives?

DL. About the phone essay, which I wrote quite a long time ago and then kept taking out for a spin around the dance floor from time to time, to see how the rhythm worked, changing the steps here and there . . . yes, it's much about the "found" world, especially the found aural world. There's a wonderful book by [Elias] Canetti called *Ear Witness* (modeled on Theophrastus and La Bruyère) in which he sketches paradigms of character, fre-

quently through bits of “overheard” comments. I like catching the strays . . . but I’m averse to chasing them. I used to know someone who would silence me so she could listen to the conversation at other tables, and it drove me nuts. If I’m going to be the aural equivalent of a voyeur, I don’t want to be methodical about it. But that’s my own aesthetic of the found. You know, finding that strange encrusted thing on the beach is one thing, but going out with one of those metal detectors is another. I don’t want to be one of those over-tanned guys with a high-tech divining rod. Though it might be interesting to talk to one of them. People are talking less to each other, of course, and grunting into their phones more. I just don’t think it’s an interesting way to live, walking around with earbuds in your ears. I know that’s a classically curmudgeonly thing to say, but the city has an aural environment, and I want to hear it when I walk. The aural atomization has affected me as a walker (shades of Alfred Kazin), which is central to my persona, so I feel when I’m walking now as though I’m threading my way through a crowd of the aurally displaced. Or perhaps it’s I who is aurally displaced. Always the last to know.

But at least to reassure you about pedestrianism, I do walk, a lot. On a steamy night, the other night, I walked forty-five minutes to my favorite movie theater, the Music Box, the best old revival house in Chicago, for a showing of the restored 35 mm version of *Leave Her to Heaven*, with Gene Tierney. Chicago is a great walking city. For me walking to the movies combines two of my greatest pleasures.

To digress . . . I couldn’t resist. I don’t think I resist the word *digression* as much as you do. If it has a neurotic association, perhaps that’s why I’m fond of it. I’m not sure there’s always a pointlessness to the essays I admire by, say, Woolf or Baldwin. Frequently there’s a very strong point. And a still, or hot, center. And a necessity to verge away from there because it’s so hot (or even cold sometimes) to the safety of the poignant relevance of one’s own experience when, say, speaking about a more general issue in, for example, *The Fire Next Time*. Not so safe in that case. As we both know, generalizing about essays is so alluring and dangerous because the form is so alluring and dangerously generous. It lets us think the form could be almost anything. Well,

almost, maybe. But in fact I want to completely join with you about the idea that the vocabulary for talking about the essay is under-theorized. So that a word like *digression* becomes an all-purpose word when it can’t possibly serve to describe everything we want it to (which doesn’t mean, I think, that it’s useless). But *wandering* is lovely. And describes something very different. And what we need, what the form needs, are actual practitioners (named Mary Cappello) to write the essay called “The Wandering Essay.”

I can’t wait to see what you’re doing with mood. Speaking of which, I think there are wonderful belletristic essays that do wander a bit as you’re describing—something like essay tone poems. Like Ravel or Fauré essays. I think some of Belloc’s essays have that quality, even some of Morley’s city essays.

And I may have subconsciously stolen the hummingbird metaphor from Henry Miller, who has a strong book of essays (better than his fiction) called *Stand Still like the Hummingbird*. Isn’t that a fine title?

About new projects, I am writing about biographical subjects! In fact the new project I’m working on is all about biographical subjects: character actors. Each chapter an essay on a different character actor: Thelma Ritter, Edward Everett Horton, Jessie Royce Landis, Leo G. Carroll, William Demarest, Sydney Greenstreet, Gloria Grahame, Beulah Bondi, Jack Carson, etc. I’ve always had an intense response to characters who weren’t the lead (undoubtedly because that’s how I think of myself) who, in the economy of Hollywood film at least were allowed to be quirky and frequently brought that quality from film to film. I may be the only charter member of the Jack Carson fan club. And Horton, for example, who was gay, constructed a very complex masculinity on screen and was also half of my favorite screen marriage: he and Jean Dixon playing Professor Nick Potter and Mrs. Susan Elliott Potter in *Holiday* (1938). The leads, of course, were Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant.

Speaking of masculinity, Jackson was this very nineteenth-century character in some ways, it seems to me. Part Dickensian (with maybe a splash of Lamb), although he was both *Oliver Twist* and part *Modern Man*. I have the sense that Chevalier Jackson was this wounded, obsessive, strange,

magical, enigmatic, talented little man. Does his story make you shiver at the strength of determinacy (the poor tormented boy!) or marvel at the possibility that anyone can survive childhood? You lead your reader to a kind of Barthesian meltdown with his boy patient, Michael H. The photograph in the final chapter of *Swallow* is so wounding, so impossible to look at, so impossible to not go back to. It's his sneer of pain to me—I don't know how else to describe it. He seems so individual, the photograph so concentration camp like. In any case I thought it was a really gutsy move so near the end of the book, and then it leaps back to that other boy, the young Chevalier. It's a very poetic swing and an elegiac one.

MC: Thanks, David. The question of "scale" and the giant who was Chevalier Jackson is an interesting one. Not exactly a Napoleon complex kind of guy; I'd say he was a person who was both larger than life and *petit*. His best-selling 1938 autobiography is structured partly according to a rags to (metaphorical) riches determinacy, but I'm just as interested in the fact that we're always dealing with his own account of himself—I mean, it's a version of his life that reflects how he wanted to be pictured, rather late in his career. And I enjoy a kind of dance with him in receiving the invitation to read his life in a particular way and then push it a tad further: the bullied boy grows up to carry out aggressive acts that save people's lives. He cuts off their airway, takes them to the threshold of consciousness—as other boys had done to him as a boy—but brings them back up for air like a gallant knight.

I'm moved by people who achieve degrees of delicacy in their lives in spite of having been victims of routinized violence. He was manhandled as a child; as an adult, he uses his hands with uncommonly exquisite, unerring delicacy. When I happened upon his coat rather late in my treks to the numerous and voluminous archives that house his ephemera, I gasped at how small it was. And it's probably not beside the point that when I saw the coat—draped with that aura of absent presence that always accompanies the clothing of the dead—it occurred to me that it was just my size. I mean, there are always degrees of denied and displaced identification in biographical work, of kinship and estrangement, of possession and dispossession.

I can't wait to see what you do with that fabulous list of character actors (Thelma Ritter in *The Mating Season*: I could watch that performance a thousand times and wish I could memorize her wisecrackingly brilliant one-liners!). Do these characters find us, or do we find them? There is a curious sort of companionship in this kind of work, and I think it's in part what distinguishes nonfiction from fiction: a call for company.

You really get to the bottom of that photo of Michael H. with that phrase *his sneer of pain*. Discovering Michael H. felt nearly mystical: the fact that his case study was left behind in Jackson's barn. That Jackson apparently had set it aside, bestowing some special significance on it. The fact of my going through this last bit of ephemera as an afterthought. And my realizing I'd seen this boy, this case, again and again in terribly anonymous ways in Jackson's textbooks but only now was being found by his story: the actual case history, complete with full name and address, country of origin, and its tragic end. It was a majorly unexpected puzzle piece, the shadow of which had been following me while I was working on the book without my knowing it. The case was a failure, but Jackson was a perfectionist. I wanted to understand the various ways in which the docs who hadn't listened to Michael H. failed him. I'll never forget that feeling: as though I were being visited by the ghost of Michael H., asking, after all these decades, for someone to tell his story. And how it felt like a discovery in two directions: did I find him, or did he find me? It was clear to me that I needed to end the book with him: I wanted him to have the last word.

The "aurally displaced"! Have I told you about my newfound fascination for Margaret Wise Brown, the children's book writer best known for *Goodnight Moon*? I learned about her unexpectedly in Hillel Schwartz's extraordinary nine hundred-page book on "noise." I was teaching a course in what I call "literary acoustics," focused mostly on nineteenth-century American texts (what happens when we read "The Tell-Tale Heart" alongside the contemporaneous invention of the stethoscope? Or if we begin to consider Dickinson's vestibular aesthetics? I frame the semester with a sound walk that the class and I orchestrate on campus). Brown, as it turns out, wrote numerous intriguingly illustrated children's books on noise and

sound and silence. And she was queer: she spent a good part of her life in a relationship with the ex-wife of John Barrymore, a poet who called herself Michael Strange. Is it time to get really wacky? I ran into Strange's coat in an exhibit on sartorial dandyism at the Rhode Island School of Design. Sadly, the placard that accompanied the coat made no mention of Strange's relationship to Brown, only of her connection to Barrymore. That coat was also a lot smaller than I imagined it to be. Wouldn't ya know. In Italian there's a slang word for *faggot* that yokes queerness to auricular displacement: gay men are the people with big ears.

You've written an essay on a coat that appears in *Occasional Desire*. It's called "The Coat." And what moves it isn't digression but interruption. I don't think digression is useless; I just am interested in learning what happens if we suspend our use of it for a while. What would have to appear in its stead? I think I'm thinking with Georges Perec in "The Apartment": "We should learn to live more on staircases, but how?" Or go for sound walks. I'm really just trying to fantasize about a place where the essay might go now and given the exigencies of our contemporary moment.

You know I'm interested in tonal complexity in nonfiction, and the high comic moments in your collection were never lost on me, especially for the way they emerge in the midst of painful material. The keynote of this collection is neither comic nor tragic, though; I think the keynote is your love of irony. There are, of course, self-ironizing tendencies built into the history of the essay, but I wonder if you find yourself working in concert with a particular brand of irony. When it comes to irony, I think Americans as a people (how's that for a generalization?) tend to have tin ears. I tend to think of Americans as not having much of an appetite for irony—I'm not even sure there's a place for it in an American lexicon. Is irony a kind of interruption? Where does it fall on a spectrum that might include smile, grin, or sneer? Is there something implicitly ironic about the character actor?

DL: *Fall* is the right word because for me irony is a kind of verbal slapstick; it's the language of William Demarest, except a bit more complex, borrowing from Stoicism and fatalism and a layered, bemused sense of self, with a

Jewish flavor. The banana peel is there before me in the street, and I think: I see that banana peel there, and my experience tells me that to walk on it would make a fool of myself; I'd slip and fall. So, I can walk around it. Except, knowing me, I'll bump into someone going around the banana peel and accidentally step on it and make things worse. It would be very awkward. Wouldn't it be better just to go ahead and walk on it, take the fall, signal to everyone that I'm not some rube who's never been around a banana peel, and slip and fall but consciously. And then, too, I'll have that experience here on this street. Maybe I can even make something out of it. But I worry about being hurt. I stand there in front of the banana peel. It's getting late. So, I pick up the banana peel and take it home. I figure I can put it down in front of me on the street tomorrow, after I've made a decision.

I wonder if the Italian connection between *faggot* and aural displacement has to do with *sotto voce*, or the *sub rosa*, the sense that one has to, in a queer or taboo subculture, listen more intently somehow. Large ears are a figure of mockery in stories or nursery rhymes. When I was growing up, big ears were always a physiognomic source of potential poking. It's interesting because unlike other male and female appendages that are valued for size, you'd think large ears could be a source of mystical power! But it's all about symmetry, alas . . . Sound is very central to me—like Lamb, who all but admits he's simply wildly neurotic about noise (Schopenhauer has a wonderful essay on noise, and Jacques Attali's book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* is this wonderful study of music as, well, instrumental sound). I'm hypersensitive to sound, too, though, ironically, I don't want to filter it out as I walk around the city—only at home. I have my students do sound walks too! I use some of the work of the Soundwalk Collective, Soundwalking Interactions, and the work of Hildegard Westerkamp and Janet Cardiff, etc.

I like what you say about the delicacy of lives, such an inescapable and almost perplexing (at least to me) quality. So lovely to see, really, and strange. Of course, who knows what psychological mayhem is ever lurking underneath (you see where I go immediately—I can't let the delicacy be

delicate). I'm always a bit like a child around people who are calm and balanced. They're like strangers to me. I don't understand their power.

And *displaced identification* is a wonderful phrase. Michael Strange. I don't know her, but I can understand the fascination. I fixate on characters, obviously, as do you, and then they become my, however you want to call them, patron saints of *strangeness*, or difference. I go through a phase when I examine them minutely—and sometimes I write about them, and sometimes I just need to adopt them or subsume some part of them. Whether it's Elisha Cook Jr. or Dorothy Fields or Dhuoda (author of the medieval mixed-genre handbook, *Liber manualis* [*Handbook for William: A Carolingian Woman's Counsel for Her Son*]).

When we're young we do that with Emily Brontë or Emily Dickinson. It's usually someone named Emily. Occasionally there's a Virginia or someone more obscure. We're sure they're ours and that we've discovered them because usually no one else around is reading this stuff. I was also watching movies and loving things like Eddie Cantor movies and Norma Shearer's strangely awkwardly compelling acting when I was young. This is what makes writers. That impulse to first adopt and understand—the impulse never leaves—to try to thoroughly know. And of course we want to somehow replicate the magic we experience and experienced. Do you remember those first quivering experiences of *Wuthering Heights* or finding Millay in your teens or Yeats?

Maybe this is a good time to shift the focus a bit to talk about teaching, teaching nonfiction specifically and our pedagogies more generally. What I've just been speaking about also, and I'm sure this will sound rather curmudgeonly, reflects an upbringing and much of my adulthood that was less distracted than our day. I mean I read a lot. A lot. For a really long time. I was telling a graduate class that for many years that's what I really did, read for about eight hours a day. But I don't think anyone can do that anymore; it's too terminally distracted an age. I count myself in that indictment too. And I think a lot of work, especially student work, reflects that. I think a lot of the "new" (some of which is not so new) kinds of work, the video essays, etc., may be interesting, but a lot of what's coming

out seems to me *distractions of form*. My students also seem distracted by form. They want to know what kind of essay they should write, for example, before they even start writing the essay, which I find somewhat amusing. I do, of course, understand that there is never an absence of form and that form should be inherent and intrinsic. But that's the rub. I suppose I'm finding the need to "play," to "build," to "assemble," to "arrange," crowding out the necessity to go into the hole you speak of (my classes, I admit, are probably more psychodynamic than some others'), and also to write the sentence. To find the way to articulate in that unit boldly, wildly, importantly. I'm getting too many sentences I either don't understand (and I don't mean Susan Howe sentences, in which the poetry of difficulty is a worthy aesthetic, but incomprehensibility) or sentences that seem lame, as though the sentence itself was a kind of afterthought in getting the essay down, which suggests an overvaluation on story or narrative. Actually, a third kind: the "lyrical" sentence, which too often is over-poeticized, frail, or trite. What my students have most trouble with is the declarative sentence.

One more thing I have to say, and I don't care if I get tomatoes thrown at me. A writer in a genre has to know her genre. I've been simply shocked over the years at the number of nonfiction writer-professors who can't talk their way past the last twenty years or so. Oh, they've read Baldwin and Woolf and some Montaigne. Well, they've read Phillip Lopate's anthology.

This is extraordinary to me and represents a debasement of what I consider the necessity of the professor's obligation to know her stuff. Who wouldn't be horrified if a poetry professor didn't know Wordsworth, Pope, Dante, Milton? But it's completely common for nonfiction professors to not know Augustine or Rousseau, Johnson or Margery Kempe, Chesterton or Bacon, Julian of Norwich or Twain. Not only does this offend me; it perplexes me. I think some of the hype in nonfiction now about hybridity is that students haven't been taught that it's been around for so long. I'm old-school though. I think students would be better off reading Alice Dunbar-Nelson or Lydia Maria Child, nineteenth-century American essayists, than lots of contemporary memoirs (they aren't mutually exclusive, of course).

Okay, I'm off the soapbox. What do you think? Oh, lest I drive you nuts, I wanted to add something and get your response to it. For a long time I've thought that the nonfiction classroom, which is to say nonfiction pedagogy, is completely under-theorized. I think this is especially true, and crucially true, in the workshop, where we're, like it or not, frequently teaching the autobiographical essay and faced with the shaping of experiences that are dramatic or traumatic, formative, complex, and tender. I have little use for the school of thought that advises that we stick to discussions of art and craft: shaping and shifting, arranging and presentation. In my experience talking about the work requires, frequently, discussion of the experience. And this is, I think, a different skill set for the instructor, in both trying to understand what, experientially, narratively, is required, missing—what the lacunae, yes, the navel, of the essay might be—and how to handle the discussion of it, especially if you have come to understand that, as I mentioned earlier, the psychodynamism of the early drafts of an essay will point to places where the subconscious has indicated subtextually but needs to be made explicit. The workshop can be a very useful place when this happens, and this happens, has happened, in my experience, a whole lot. But it can also be painful. So, I suppose my point is, what is the preparation, what is the pedagogy, for these situations? I'm trying to pull together a class on the psychodynamism of the workshop, but we at least need to be talking and writing about it more. I talk about my many years of therapy in the workshop as a way of letting the class know at least that psychological vulnerability is part of the nature of writing a certain kind of essay and that we need to use different kinds of language, terms of aesthetic criticism and textual analysis along with the language of psychology and affect. I've heard writers of autobiographical essays demur when asked if their work is therapeutic. My response to that is, hell yes. And the workshop is a therapeutic space at times too. But because of what is at stake, it can also be a dangerous space. I think we should consult with psychologists more. All of which is to say, I fantasize about teaching a class with Adam Phillips.

Okay, and in addition to all of that, I want to hear about your new work on mood. Please?

MC: Since these final questions we're approaching are so big, David, I'll start off with a minimalist approach to pedagogy. In thirty words or less the matters that are currently compelling me in the creative nonfiction workshop are the idea of the note and notebook as nonfiction form; the lecture mode of yore that incited a particular type of listener/reader; Cageian silences and other modes of critical nonresistance to the digital world; and nonfiction beyond the page or in performance. That's probably more than thirty words, and I hope it doesn't align me with those "distracted by form."

In your concern about teachers' or students' disinterest in reading or in studying essayistic traditions, I wonder if the problem you are drawing attention to is one of centrism. In spite of global this and that, Americans still enjoy degrees of insulation from or curiosity about anything other than ourselves and what we might call the me-now. Of course, we indulge such centrism to our detriment and the world's. Is a writer or teacher compelled by the short view or the long view, the centrist view or the capacious view?

On the other hand, couldn't it be argued that your history of the essay is not *the* history of the essay? Or that other people might reserve the right to pursue and argue for their own histories of the form? I find that one of the pleasures and beauties of literary nonfiction as a practice is that it encourages the formation of an uncommon archive, a concept that is very important to me: the potentially wide-ranging and unpredictable, sometimes highly privatized and never simply dictated, suite of sources (other texts, ephemera, music, etc.) that we each, so to speak, "consult" when we're at work on a particular composition. Not an obligatory reading list, it's improvisatory, drawn from a wellspring of influences and untapped or unacknowledged sources, including other disciplines.

You are also making me wonder if we're in a terminally distracted age or a terminally fixated one. The *idée fixe*, the stare, the affectless patina that becomes our faces in front of the screen. It's not the first time in the history of the world that humans are suffering from a crisis in attention, in how to notice and what to perceive, in where to locate meaning and how to be attuned to others. I suppose the difference of our age, for any age beset by such a challenge, is how we will make something out of our moment rather

than be trapped by it. I have no doubt that what we experience as the “inner life” is shifting and eroding, and I think it will morph into something else by the end of the twenty-first century and after we’re long gone. So, too, the sentence and what we think of as an essay’s egress to interiority will change either to counter or meet that transformation.

Oh boy, approaching the other big question you raise, the matter of therapy and writing pedagogy, is definitely a thorny area, and I don’t want to seem to fall into one camp or another because I really have thought about and dealt with these things a lot, and like you, I try to appreciate their complexity. I think it goes without saying that some writers in my literary nonfiction workshops have life-changing revelations in the course of working in this genre, and they go to places intellectually and emotionally where they’ve not been before. In the department where I teach, we offer the PhD with creative writing emphasis as well as master’s degrees in a program in which the creative writers work closely with scholars and literary theorists too—so we’re all about cultivating writers who want that knowledge of literary historical traditions you’re concerned about alongside an appetite for critical theory and philosophy. Because the idea of unburdening oneself is already in people’s minds when they think of nonfiction, memoir in particular, I’m not keen on the idea of team teaching with a favorite psychoanalyst. On the other hand, Adam Phillips is probably already present in both our classes—insofar as we’ve internalized so much of his work and thought—and his kind of psychoanalytic thinking is so nuanced, not at all aligned with the conventional notion that we can express ourselves and get free. As my friend Jim Morrison (the writer, not the rock star) likes to say, “There is no catharsis.” There’s no liberation, just a rearrangement of parts. Because we’re such a wound-based culture, a health-obsessed but care-averse culture, admitting therapy as discourse or practice into the creative writing classroom doesn’t appeal to me. Nor do the models of either selfhood or writing that attend the idea of writing as a form of healing. Does writing take us to a transformational space? Yes. To a place I want to dwell most of the time? Yes. It’s a place where play gets transformed into the best kind of work, and vice versa, but I don’t think it’s

therapeutic. Eating junk food, watching TV, washing dishes, are therapeutic activities for me. They induce a combination of numbness, self-forgetting, self-indulgence, and relaxation that feels good at times.

I’m remembering when I was about a year out from my breast cancer ordeal, telling my oncologist that I’d written a book from it, and her sing-song response: “That must have been very therapeutic for you!” I remember feeling like hitting her when she said that. A lot of other things had been therapeutic—acupuncture, physical therapy, a hairdresser who was also a nurse, etc.—but the writing came from an entirely different place and was addressed to something larger. Was I writing for my life? Maybe. In which case it was beyond therapeutic. It was essential to survival; it was urgent.

The other problem with the writing and therapy connection, I find, is that when it brings healing into play, it can produce a writing that is closed, solved, finished, whereas I think of creative nonfiction as a form of radical openness, like the poetry of Emily Dickinson, or in terms of my friend Mikhail Epstein’s definition of the essay: he calls it “a reparative act that isn’t closed.”

I was teaching Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* recently, and enjoying all over again the possibilities it offers life writing to start with language rather than with experience, to not take anything for granted, including the presumably singular *I* that governs the page. And how it can tempt students to start from someplace else with their autobiographical writing, to give themselves over to a different compositional practices attuned to language: the self as equivalent to the questions that preoccupy it, its life sentences. I think that taking approaches that run athwart mere expression can help writers in our classes to find truths otherwise and, yes, to find a form for formless trauma. Of course all of this depends on the vectors of trust and curiosity that have to be fostered in a workshop’s writing community. What would happen if we dispensed with creative nonfiction and literary nonfiction and instead gave each new instantiation of our non-fictive forays the name most suited to the terms of its experimentation? It’s that dance of the intellect that my own work aspires to, “lyric intellectual,” and that I think Adam Phillips’s work achieves.

How's this for a segue? Have you seen Adam Phillips's new piece in *Salmagundi*, "Up to a Point: The Psychoanalyst and the Essay"? "The essayist is the writer who extricates theory from science." That's sort of what I'm doing in the "mood" book I'm currently working on. I've been dreaming this book for a number of years. The impulse behind the book is somewhat similar to *Awkward* insofar as I've chosen to take on a word that is everywhere pervasive but that remains relatively unplumbed. I'm not sure that any of us really knows what we mean when we speak of mood even though we talk about moods in a plethora of contexts—from psychology to politics to aesthetics—and with a variety of consequences. Without pinning mood down, I'm trying to let it take me to unpredictable places and hopefully make something beautiful in the process. Mainly, I want to follow mood as a language rather than reify it as a concept. Something of the wild has to be allowed to come through.

I want to understand the relationship between mood and sound. Moods are absent presences: we can feel them but not locate their source enough to change them. In this sense mood is sound's analog—a perceptible something not readily coeval with its source. I've always been moved by Didier Anzieu's notion of what he calls the "sonorous envelope"—the protective and precarious holding environment (literally, a skin) that is produced for us by the voice of our earliest caretakers. So, voice is important to my excavation—mood as being's envelope or a self's atmosphere—which takes me to weather! How are moods different from climates (over and against the idea that what we take to be the "weather" affects our "moods")?

The book is taking on a multi-genre form, perched somewhere between *The Secret Life of Plants* and Roland Barthes's *The Neutral*.

I've been wondering if, in mood's name, I can create a writing that approximates cloudscapes.

And now, David, I must tell you that something happened to me today that signaled the perfect closure for my part of our conversational investigation. I was in the mail room at my university Xeroxing something for my students, when I noticed that one of my colleague's mailboxes was filled to the brim with books. Of course, our mailboxes are all open affairs—a

huge wall of cubbyholes. This particular colleague, S., is someone I've learned a great deal from over the years, so when I saw that his mailbox was stacked with books, I really wanted to read their spines. I started to paw through them. I know, this is kind of extraordinary—does it position the essayist as thief? as lurker? as someone who takes liberties? Or is it just that the contents of other people's mailboxes, like their telephone conversations, are simply there for the asking these days? One of the books was a volume of Virginia Woolf's essays, so of course I had to open that one and peruse the table of contents, ever in search of inspiration or the sentence never before glimpsed. And there it was, a little gasp-making phrase at the bottom of her table of contents page, the title of a review essay that appeared in the *TLS* [*Times Literary Supplement*] in December 1906: it read, "Occasion's Forelock."

For me this closes the mystic circle of our essayistic "interview." So, now can we go for a long walk together at the end of which we arrive at a movie? Or do you need another question? Here's one from that same *Salmagundi* essay, in which Phillips is quoting Woolf. I wonder how you'd answer it: "A novel has a story; a poem rhyme; but what art can the essayist use in these short lengths of prose to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life—a basking with every faculty alert, in the sun of pleasure?"

DL: The essayist snaps his fingers and raises an eyebrow. He'll actually ask, "Are you with me?" Then, just for your amusement or to give you a sense of what makes her tick, she'll do a little rhythm tap, right on the pavement. He'll say, "Got to love those pronouns." She'll say, please don't tell me where we're headed; let's see where this perambulation takes us. It might be interesting. And then he'll tell the story of the walk later, over a drink.

I do want to just respond to a couple of things before we close. If I seem prescriptive, it certainly isn't about the form the essay might take. Goodness knows I've written enough different kinds of essays and published enough different kinds of essays . . . Montaigne himself was showing off the elasticity of the form in 1580. Nor do I think there's a set list, a comp

list, that can't be deviated from in understanding the form. I'm not Allan Blooming it. Though I'm not rejecting the idea of the essay canon either. I think my passion in addressing this topic might be misunderstood for prescription. But I do think it doesn't make any sense to write essays without knowing what *essay* has meant for 450 years. Forms are made to be expanded, to be confounded, to be exploded. If you're going to be serious about the kind of work you want to do and you're going to want to talk about it, I simply can't imagine not knowing your traditions. If that sounds hopelessly old-fashioned, I'm willing to own that. But that doesn't mean I'm arguing for a specific kind of essay. It means I want to argue about the essay with people like you. I suppose I'm supposed to say "discuss," but I'm from Brooklyn.

Essayists have always tried to say what the essay is. It's part of our vocation and our avocation. And we're blissfully doomed to fail. Perhaps that in itself is at the beating heart of the essay.

On the therapeutic value of writing: I think the distinction between catharsis and epiphany is a crucial division for me. Writing is a vehicle for cathartic emotional/intellectual play for me, constantly. The release is the ability to say what I haven't been able to say. But epiphanies . . . I'm very suspicious of, and I think they're rare and at best limited. Catharsis is release from repression, finding a way to say what one hasn't been able to, and I think in writing essays one does, if one is lucky, willing, talented, dedicated, despite Jim's imprecation, in my experience, hold that as one of the great possibilities of essay writing. What Jean Starobinski beautifully calls Montaigne's "intuition of the inevitability of change" is the great catharsis that threads through most essays, discovered differently, frequently incompletely, but also often with a liberating lift to the self-capturing consciousness. And therapy for me is dynamic, process oriented (whatever the process is: choose your portion). Not comfort food but an array of dishes spiced to challenge. Whether it heals or not . . . old wounds don't die—they just get more interesting clothing.

About Adam Phillips's comment "The essayist is the writer who extricates theory from science"—I'd prefer to think that the essayist is the

writer who integrates theory with art. After all, Mary, you're the gorgeous practitioner of this.

What's compelling me now is just trying to write interesting new essays. Different forms, yes! And some very classical ones. Some even come in the form of conversations. The good conversation is a dance, a pas de deux, and yes, a walk! Who could wish for a better companion than Mary Cappello.



I'LL
BE
YOUR
MIRROR

Essays & Aphorisms

DAVID LAZAR

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For Lois
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