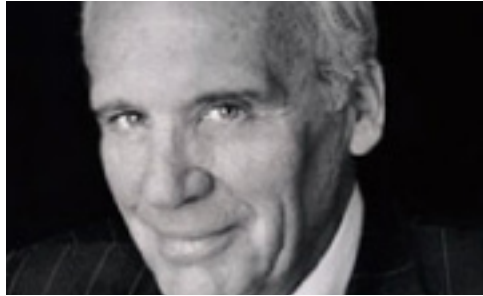


*Our ignorance of history causes us to slander our own times.*  
—Gustave Flaubert



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## FIGURES OF SPEECH

Lewis H. Lapham

Notebook departs this month from the table of contents, its purpose served and its license expired after a term of twenty-six years in office. The occasion allows for a fond farewell. The rubric made its first appearance in March 1984 as a function of the magazine's redesign that followed by two months Apple's bringing forth the first of its Macintosh computers. The Internet didn't exist, the tweet and blog post were not yet known as forms or figures of speech. Three elements of the redesign (Readings, Annotation, the Index) anticipated the sensibility soon to venture forth on the wine-dark sea of cyberspace. Notebook was rooted in the soils of print, a monthly reflection on the ways of the world, intended to acquaint the magazine's readers with the presuppositions of its editor.

To meet the requirement I undertook to learn to write an essay, a form of literary address at which I hadn't had much practice but in which, fortunately, I had encountered most of the authors in whose company I had learned to read. Also fortunately, my understanding of what constituted an essay was sufficiently non-restrictive to account for the letters of Seneca as well as Twain's sketches and Thurber's fables, Flaubert's *Dictionary*, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, Gibbon's notes on the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, to-

gether with the miscellaneous observations of Plutarch, Swift, Strachey, Guedalla, Diderot, Lincoln, Chesterton, Mencken, DeVoto, Bolitho, Hazlitt, and Voltaire. A long list that became even longer when I added the names of the living authors, among them Connell, Didion, Galeano, Leonard, Lopez, Hoagland, Dillard, Karp, Rodriguez, Ehrenreich, Fairlie, Keizer, Hitchens, Geng, and Robinson, whose essays I had the chance to publish in *Harper's Magazine* during the administrations of five American presidents.

The names are representative, meant to suggest the range of expression and the wealth of possibility that I rope into a notion of the essay borrowed from Michel de Montaigne. The sixteenth-century French autobiographer, a contemporary of Shakespeare and Cervantes, derived the approach to his topics from the meaning of the word *essai*, from *essayer* (to try, to embark upon, to attempt), asking himself at the outset of his reflections, whether on cannibals or the custom of wearing clothes, "What do I know?" The question distinguishes the essay from the less adventurous forms of expository prose—the dissertation, the polemic, the article, the campaign speech, the tract, the op-ed, the arrest warrant, the hotel bill. Writers determined to render a judgment or swing an election, to cast a moneylender out of a temple or deliver a message to Garcia, begin the first paragraph knowing how, when, where, and why they intend to claim the privilege of the last word. Not so the essayist, even if what he or she is writing purports to be a history or a field report. Like Twain's Huckleberry Finn, the essayist lights out for the territories, never sure of the next sentence until the words show up on the page. Thus an improvisation, experimental and provisional, amenable to multiple shifts of perspective, quickly changed, with only a slight tinkering of emphasis or circumstance, into a sales pitch or a sermon. Which probably is why Benjamin Franklin treated the essay as the literary device best suited to the restlessness of the American spirit in a hurry to settle a new line of country, find a fortune, assemble a body politic, compose the portrait of a convincing self. Daniel Boorstin, the historian and once-upon-a-time Librarian of Congress, touched on the same point when describing the makeshift character of the colonial experience:

No prudent man dared to be too certain of exactly who he was or what he was about; everyone had to be prepared to become someone else. To be ready for such perilous transmigrations was to become an American.

Carry the observation around the next bend in the river or up into the next stand of cottonwood trees, and the essayist, like it or not,

willingly or no, becomes, as per the advisory once issued by another Librarian of Congress, the poet Archibald MacLeish, “the dissenter [who] is every human being at those moments of his life when he resigns momentarily from the herd and thinks for himself.”

Easier said than done, the thinking for oneself. I was never very good at it, and an opinion I always found hard to come by. The monthly Notebook called for remarks somehow related to something visible in the news—scandal in Washington, war in Israel, money in Hollywood, sex in Connecticut, divine revelation in Arkansas—but on none of the topics was I equipped with either certain knowledge or inside information. What I was apt to know about President Clinton or Michael Jackson was of a piece with what I was apt to know about Princess Diana or President Bush—i.e., nothing much beyond what I’d seen on television or read in the newspapers, which, as I remembered from the years in which I’d worked as a reporter for the *New York Herald Tribune* and a contract journalist for both *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Life*, often was even less than nothing much. How then to proceed? By drawing upon the authority of Montaigne, who begins his essay “Of Books” with what would be regarded on both Wall Street and Capitol Hill as a career-ending display of transparency:

I have no doubt that I often speak of things which are better treated by the masters of the craft, and with more truth. This is simply a trial [*essai*] of my natural faculties, and not of my acquired ones. If anyone catches me in ignorance, he will score no triumph over me, since I can hardly be answerable to another for my reasonings, when I am not answerable for them to myself, and am never satisfied with them. . . . These are my fancies, in which I make no attempt to convey information about things, only about myself. I may have some objective knowledge one day, or may perhaps have had it in the past when I happened to light on passages that explained things. But I have forgotten it all; for though I am a man of some reading, I am one who retains nothing.

My own case more or less to the letter. When I was thirty I assumed that by the time I was fifty I would know what I was talking about. The notice didn’t arrive in the mail. At fifty I knew less than what I thought I knew at thirty, and so I figured that by the time I was seventy, then surely, this being America, where all the stories supposedly end in the key of C major, I would have come up with a reason to believe that I had been made wise. Now I’m seventy-five, and I see no sign of a dog with a bird in its mouth.

I'm reminded instead of a story told about Pablo Casals at the age of ninety-three, living in Puerto Rico with a woman many years younger than himself. A journalist sent forth from New York asked him why he practiced the cello every morning for four hours. Here he was, the most famous cellist in the world, no longer performing on the concert stage, at ease in the Caribbean sun. Why then the unnecessary labor? Because, so Casals is reported to have said, I'm learning something.

I approach the act and art of writing with the same hope. I never know what I think about anything—the stains on Monica Lewinsky's blue dress, O. J. Simpson's golf swing, a “war on terror” declared against an unknown enemy and an abstract noun, the mystery of the Laffer Curve, the death and transfiguration of Ronald Reagan—unless and until I try to set up a thought in a sentence or catch it in the butterfly net of a metaphor.

Construe the essay as a thinking out loud, and by its improvisational nature it inclines in the direction of poetry or music, the language meant to be heard, not seen. On the opening of a book or the looking into a manuscript I listen for the sound of a voice in the first-person singular, and from authors whom I read more than once I learn to value the weight of words and to delight in their meter and cadence—in Gibbon's polyphonic counterpoint and Guedalla's command of the subjunctive, in Mailer's hyperbole and Dillard's similes, in Twain's invectives and burlesques with which he set the torch of his ferocious wit to the hospitality tents of the world's “colossal humbug.”


The work never got easier, but neither did it lose its character as play. Notebook was a speculation on whatever was then the current market in ideas, and I was more interested in the wandering of the mind than in the harnessing of it to the bandwagons of social and political reform. I welcomed revisions pursued through six or seven drafts as chances to improve a choice of word, experiment with the uses of satire, control the balance of a subordinate clause, replace the adjective with a noun. The best that I hoped for was a manuscript that required not only the shifting around of a few paragraphs but also the abandonment of its postulates and premise.

My object was to learn, not preach, which prevented my induction into the national college of pundits but encouraged my reading of history. Again I borrowed the method of Montaigne, who measured the worth of his own observations against those that he came

across in the archive of classical antiquity, most reliably in the writings of Plutarch and Seneca. I soon discovered that I had as much to learn from the counsel of the dead as I did from the advice and consent of the living. The reading of history damps down the impulse to slander the trend and tenor of the times, instills a sense of humor, lessens our fear about what might happen tomorrow. On listening to President Barack Obama preach the doctrine of freedom-loving military invasion to the cadets at West Point, I'm reminded of the speeches that sent the Athenian army to its destruction in Sicily in 415 b.c., and I don't have to wait for dispatches from Afghanistan to suspect that the shooting script for the Pax Americana is a tale told by an idiot. In the newsmagazines I read about the unhygienic environments imperiling the health and safety of the American people (pesticides in the rivers, carcinogens in the soup, cigarette smoke in the park), and somehow I take comfort in the long life and splendor of Louis XIV, who is said to have bathed only once during the years 1647–1711. Water was under suspicion in seventeenth-century Christian Europe, and except in the baptismal font bathing was to be avoided because it invited sin. Confronted with the malfunction of the critics handing out the nation's literary prizes I grant them the excuse of an historical precedent, bearing in mind President Teddy Roosevelt's opinion of Henry James ("a miserable little snob"), of Thomas Paine ("filthy little atheist"), of Leo Tolstoy ("a sexual and moral pervert"). On being informed by the propaganda ministries of the Republican right that money is a synonym for peace on earth and good will toward men, that the capitalist free market is virtue incarnate, I resist the call for a standing ovation by remembering that Hugo Boss dressed Hitler's troops, that the Ford Motor Company in the 1930s outfitted the Wehrmacht with its armored trucks, that the Rockefeller Foundation financed the prewar medical research meant to confirm Nazi theories of racial degeneration.

The common store of our shared history is what Goethe had in mind when he said that the inability to "draw on three thousand years is living hand to mouth." It isn't with symbolic icons that men make their immortality. They do so with what they've learned on their travels across the frontiers of the millennia, salvaging from the wreck of time what they find to be useful or beautiful or true. What preserves the voices of the great authors from one century to the next is not the recording device (the clay tablet, the scroll, the codex, the book, the computer, the iPad) but the force of imagination and the power of expression. It is the strength of the words themselves, not their product placement, that invites the play of mind and induces a change of heart. Acknowledgment of the fact

lightens the burden of mournful prophecy currently making the rounds of the media trade fairs. I listen to anguished publishers tell sad stories about the disappearance of books and the death of Western civilization, about bookstores selling cat toys and teddy bears, but I don't find myself moved to tears. On the sorrows of Grub Street the sun never sets, but it is an agony of Mammon, not a hymn to Apollo. The renders of garments mistake the container for the thing contained, the book for the words, the iPod for the music. The questions in hand have to do with where the profit, not the meaning, is to be found, who collects what tolls from which streams of revenue or consciousness. The same questions accompanied the loss of the typewriter and the Linotype machine, underwrote the digging of the Erie Canal and the building of Commodore Vanderbilt's railroads, the rigging of the nation's television networks and telephone poles, and I expect them to be answered by one or more corporate facilitators with both the wit and the bankroll to float the pretense that monopoly is an upgraded synonym for a free press, "prioritized" and "context-sensitive," offering "quicker access to valued customers."

The more interesting questions are epistemological. How do we know what we think we know? Why is it that the more information we collect the less likely we are to grasp what it means? Possibly because a montage is not a narrative, the ear is not the eye, a pattern recognition is not a figure or a form of speech. The surfeit of new and newer news comes so quickly to hand that within the wind tunnels of the "innovative delivery strategies" the data blow away and shred. The time is always now, and what gets lost is all thought of what happened yesterday, last week, three months or three years ago. Unlike moths and fruit flies, human beings bereft of memory, even as poor a memory as Montaigne's or my own, tend to become disoriented and confused. I know no other way out of what is both the maze of the eternal present and the prison of the self except with a string of words. 

Lewis H. Lapham is Editor of *Lapham's Quarterly*. Formerly Editor of *Harper's Magazine*, he is the author of numerous books, including *Money and Class in America*, *Theater of War*, *Gag Rule*, and, most recently, *Pretensions to Empire*. *The New York Times* has likened him to H. L. Mencken; *Vanity Fair* has suggested a strong resemblance to Mark Twain; and Tom Wolfe has compared him to Montaigne. A native of San Francisco, Mr. Lapham was educated at Yale and Cambridge.

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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