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**The Digital “I”: The Spirit and Form of the Blog and the Serialization of the
Self**

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
THE ORIGINS OF BLOGGING.....	6
MONTAIGNE AND THE BIRTH OF A GENRE.....	20
THE CONVERSANT SELF, SOCIETY, AND THE BLOGOSPHERE.....	42
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND ISSUES OF GENRE.....	74
TOWARDS A LITERARY BLOGOSPHERE.....	85
CONCLUSION.....	100
BIBLOGRPAPHY.....	102

INTRODUCTION

With the hyper-accelerated nature of the web, blogging, the act of generating writing online using web-publishing tools, has nearly passed out of fashion. The content of blogs, encompassing everything from brief, personal reflections, to a catalog of activities, to more elongated screeds on varied topics, adapts and incorporates the shifting dictates of online media. Web developers, technology enthusiasts, and Internet futurists foresee a more mobile, application-based engagement for Web 2.0 and beyond, one that doesn't necessarily include publishing large swaths of text. Anil Dash encouraged a move towards stream-based applications in a recent post titled "Stop Publishing Web Pages." Verifiable or no, the myth that audiences do not have the attention span for reading lengthy, detailed content is a prevailing sentiment. The frequent occurrence of the abbreviation "tl;dr" in comment threads on longer online articles, which is internet slang for "too long; didn't read," is an indicator of that mindset. "Small is sexy now," Joe Bonomo writes, "and the Internet, in particular, is courting" (166). The whiplash nature of the internet is such that crafted, essayistic writing is now back in fashion in more of a niche category, versus list or graphics-based content. Proponents have even begun applying the term "longreads"--as a label and a hashtag devised by Mark Armstrong to cull and categorize said material-- to pieces of internet writing whose word count exceeds easily-digestible bits of text.

A blog, in the various ways early practitioners and observers of the form detailed, can function as both the map and the destination, the compass and the coordinates. Web proselytizers preach the newness of the blog, its uniqueness and development in place and time, but neglect to connect the style of writing, and moreover the impetus to publish, to open a frank discussion and define the self through the act of writing, with part of a longer historical precedent. The blog may be “a form that is native to the Web,” as Rebecca Blood says, which is true in a technological sense, but this study argues the form has a deeper spiritual ancestry (*Weblog Handbook* 9). The narratives bloggers generate are conversant with the modes of writing established by Montaigne in the sixteenth century, which further developed in and around the eighteenth century: confessional writing, the advent of the public sphere, the ideas of privacy and the self. It is not enough to satisfy the question of what the blog is, its usage and functionality, and its very recent history, but it is necessary to establish its place in context with its genre lineage by focusing on two main pillars in the development of the familiar essay, Montaigne's *Essays* and the periodicals of *the Spectator* and the *Tatler*, the prior informing the spirit of blogging, while the latter gives shape to its form and engagement.

As the medium of blogging is now in its second decade, its persistence points to the fact that the impulse to create and consume autobiographical writing has not been supplanted, and is still a key component in the make-up of the

Internet. On the surface, it is the protean, transitory nature of blogging that is often misconstrued or miscategorized as formless and shallow. Yet, as this study will explore, the blog does share identifiable traits with its stylistic antecedents: both the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne and Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's eighteenth-century periodical essays from *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. Both these foundational works bestow significant influence on the style of blogging, from Montaigne's interrogation of the self-as-subject to Addison and Steele's conversational, topical dispatches within the public sphere. As we'll discuss later, the casual amateurishness of the form leads critics to dismiss online writing at best as solipsistic, a hobbyist pursuit and a vanity press, and worse as an enemy to professional, filtered content. These critics are basing their responses on principles of authorship and publishing--often tied to economic concerns--that were only codified in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not placing the practice in a historical or cultural context or examining where blogs furthers established styles of confessional writing. To correctly place blogging and blogging culture in the context of the genre of the essay it is important to understand what it is, what it does, and how the practice of blogging evolved from a more obscure act into something that has been monetized and professionalized and co-opted by commercial media.

The following chapters propose a working genre lineage for the blog, beginning with Michel de Montaigne and his *Essays*. Through Montaigne and his

writing, the thesis will pose questions still relevant to the discussion of autobiographical writing and notions of the self, as well as the embedded characteristics of the essay that translate to online confessional writing, exploring the idea of creating a composite of the self through accumulation of fragmentary pieces, and a movement of the self through text and time, while arguing that the idea of a fixed, intractable text is counter to the essay's structure. From Montaigne this study will demonstrate the connections between the eighteenth-century periodical essays and the blog, investigating the relevant theories of the public sphere and serialized publication, as well as the conversational aspect of informal essayistic writing. Through the research of Stuart Sherman on time and the diary, and Felicity Nussbaum's work on eighteenth century representations of self and genre, this thesis makes connections to broader cultural themes still relevant to the twenty-first century. The subsequent chapter will return to theories of the essay in the twentieth-century, and the vexing problems of form and content in relation to genre, as addressed by Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno, as well as the dominance of the formal scholarly essay over the familiar style created by Montaigne. The thesis arrives at the conclusion that new technology has always created new spaces for expression, and the blog, a relatively new form, find itself grappling with a place in the literary firmament as more people engage in online autobiographical writing. This desire for confessional and self-appraisal is part of a continuum, informed by the ideas of the past which still hold sway over the style

of writing found on blogs.

THE ORIGINS OF BLOGGING

The history of the blog *qua* blog, and the phenomenon of blogging, is quite brief in relation to its literary forbears. Even the word blog itself, a portmanteau of weblog--its usage credited to Peter Merholtz in 1999, who split weblog into “we blog”--connotes brevity, if not, with its mouthfeel, something small, prosaic, even ugly. But much like Montaigne's choice of the word essay, from the French *essai*, meaning attempt or try, blog functions as both noun and verb, and similar to the essay, this digital-age experimentation carries with it the sense of text-in-process, the act of recording ideas in the moment, an endeavor to compile and reconcile one's thoughts as they occur. It is as much a reflection of the author as the form in which it appears, and its malleability is an inherent part of its make-up. Weblog, the word, was attributed to John Barger in 1997 to describe the type of online documentation he was doing on his site Robot Wisdom. Scott Rosenberg, in his book *Say Everything*, thinks the term was more than apt for the format. In his somewhat romanticized appraisal: “[I]t had resonances—a nautical air, a *Star Trek* echo—that would help it, over the next year and a half, win out over the other labels that vied to describe the new phenomenon of personal sites with links and commentary in reverse chronological order” (79).

That is the root and most basic form, if not function, of the blog: a website

that utilizes hyperlinks and is published in reverse chronological order, with entries timestamped. Posts are indexed according to date and time, and can be categorized or tagged. In this way the blog serves as both text and index. The hyperlink, a clickable unit comprised of a word, phrase, or image that takes readers from one page to another, is a key building block of online writing. “As the full form of the name suggests, a blog is a web application which allows the user to enter, display, and edit posts at any time, David Crystal writes. “It is essentially a content-management system-- a way of getting content onto a web page” (*Language and the Internet* 240). From that spare definition of its function, the usage of the blog has since grown, kudzu-like, all over the web. Like the diary and the broadsheet, a blog's timestamp, its chronological marker, is indispensable to its “formal consistency” as Amardeep Singh has suggested (25). The timestamp not only clues the reader into the blogger's frequency of posting, but situates the writing in a context of dailiness.

Rebecca Blood was an early blogger and one of the first to try and document what was still the mostly-burgeoning blogosphere as it was happening, trying to mint the fundamental attributes of the “first-wave weblogs” (4). In Blood's *Weblog Handbook*, part explanatory document and part practical how-to manual, and which grew out of an essay from 2000 posted on her personal site Rebecca's Pocket, she proceeded to divide weblogs into three loose designations: blogs, notebooks, and filters. They range from inward focused, to outward, to a

blend of the two. Blogs, the most common, were daily, short, and featured links less prominently. Notebooks, in Blood's view, while sometimes turning the author's attention to the larger world, were longer entries and had a narrative basis. Blogs tend to be more reactive to events of the day, while notebooks are more ruminative, and can encompass the blogger's past and present circumstances in lengthier posts. Links were secondary or often not included if not necessary. Filters, then, are in Blood's estimate the form of the "classic weblog," the link taking prominence over any personal content. Filters point readers of the blog around the Web, at the discretion of the blogger: "The self, when it appears on a filter-style weblog, is revealed obliquely, through its relation to the larger world" (6-8). Blood is nothing if not a proselytizer for the blog, lauding the newness of the form in lieu of the long view, but in touching on where the self is located in the writing, she hearkens to some of the fundamental questions of blogging those of authorship and engagement with a readership, the public. Whether foregrounded or, as in the case of filters more obscured, there is the presence of an authorial "voice," a self (or presentation thereof) which is distinct and not edited out through external directives. Indeed, several of the early bloggers who were put in the position to defend blogging seemed intent on making definitive claims and pronouncements about the practice, while also admitting that it is evolving even as they do so. As Meg Hourihan wrote in her post "What We're Doing When We Blog" from 2002:

As bloggers, we're in the middle of, and enjoying, an evolution of communication. The traits of weblogs mentioned above will likely change and advance as our tools improve and our technology matures. What's important is that we've embraced a medium free of the physical limitations of pages, intrusions of editors, and delays of tedious publishing systems.

The fundamental organizing principles of the blog in relation to its technological makeup are the hyperlink, the timestamp, and the permalink. The permalink, a feature of the web introduced by the web service Blogger in 2000, led to a way of indexing individual posts rather than pages, making them the fundamental units of the blog, and thereby online writing. And, as Rosenberg points out, permalinks affected the conversationality of online writing. The permalink added an archival aspect. The published material, and what could be linked to, was not only the newest entry but all the parts of the corpus of that particular blog (206). This makes the blog both a text and an index. The permalink, in its very name, gives an indication of permanence, even in relation to the seemingly quicksilver medium of the Internet. It is an anchor for the particular entry, or unit of text, weighting in relation to the rest of the content on the blog. When comment functions were introduced, the idea of the post as a conversation between the author and readers of the blog deepened even further. There was authorial engagement, in a timely manner, and content could be updated as

warranted based on the feedback of the readership. There was an invitation into the process of composition, to an extent. The danger, potentially for the author, was distortion. Too much criticism or too much praise might affect the “I” behind the blog. The potential to overcompensate or correct became part of the composition process, based on the response of the audience. Comment functionality also increased to a point where those separate entries were arranged by time markers, so even this discourse was time-logged and archivable. Of these structural markers, the hyperlink, the most elastic of these indicators, exhibits the features of intertextuality. Instead of moving between the thoughts of multiple authors in one synchronic text, or from book to book, the hyperlink moves readers from website to website, or blog post to blog post. It is, as David Crystal calls it, a “fundamental structural property” (*Language and the Internet* 210). Instead of just block quoting, echoing, or alluding, there is now an ingrained sense of movement across the screen. It can be read as indicative of an author's point of view, a unit of information folded in or sending the reader outward, deemed worthy of attention.

What the technology behind blogs does is allow authors to publish at will. Most of the tools of production are free and available to anyone with a computer and a connection to the internet. The free publishing software Blogger was developed in early 2001, and a year after its launch it had close to 700,000 users (Baker). Following blogger, a number of free or relatively inexpensive content

management systems were developed to make the process of blogging available, including Moveable Type, WordPress, Typepad and Drupal. Unlike the websites and homepages that preceded blogs, little to no technical savvy was necessary to begin posting online. Knowledge of coding was not a prerequisite. This factored into the growth of blogging, as it gave casual computer users the equivalent of a digital printing press and an avenue for publication, the means of production and a specific channel for distribution. A blog, as defined by blogger, is vague yet inclusive: “A blog is a personal diary. A daily pulpit. A collaborative space. A political soapbox. A breaking-news outlet. A collection of links. Your own private thoughts. Memos to the world” (“What’s a blog?”)

A Swarthmore College student, Justin Hall, is widely credited with the creation of the first ever blog, *Links.net*, in 1994. However, with all adapted styles of writing, it is typically hard to pinpoint the exact moment of origin. Internet nostalgics are keen to point to bulletin board systems (BBS) and Internet forums, not to mention the traditional home pages that proliferated on the early web, as precursors to the blog. Already the non-technical features of the blog are in dispute. “[T]here was no first blogger. Blogging is a set of tools and practices that evolved together over time” (Rosenberg, *SayEverything.com*). While tracing the roots of blogging to one individual is a difficult act--there is no Michel de Montaigne of the blogosphere though there are those that come close--there are cultural factors that influenced the rise of blogging, and a social context that give

the practice meaning. The fact that this advancement was occurring rapidly and in a media-saturated environment meant that a level of self-scrutiny encoded itself in the development of the blog, becoming part of the larger conversation.

Blogging pioneer Andrew Sullivan began his site in July of 2000, and by 2002 a handful of other blogs that would be influential in the shaping of the content and tone of the web were launched, including Heather Armstrong's *Dooce*, and two of the linchpins in Nick Denton's blog empire: *Gizmodo* and the flagship gossip site *Gawker*. By 2004 “blog” was chosen as Merriam-Webster's “Word of the Year” (Thompson).

The models of those “tools and practices” were quickly, adopted, however, and informally codified to an extent. The early blogging community was highly imitative, bloggers coalescing around particular layout and modes of interaction despite the perceived newness, and novelty, of the medium. In what was thought of as a relatively unprofitable endeavor, attention was currency. Blogs tended to include a collection of links in the sidebar, dubbed a blogroll, a collection of hyperlinks that led readers to other blogs or websites, an implied further reading list. In this sense community-building, of readership and kinship with fellow bloggers, evolved alongside the practice. The link back was the particular currency of the early blogosphere, a tacit acknowledgment of the existence of a particular blog, and by extension its worth. The tendency to extend a thank you to another blogger, or source, with a “hat tip” (written h/t) social gesture that became

commonplace, and crediting another site with a “via” link was considered polite, and a way to build and share Internet traffic (Rosenberg 88). A system of micro-patronage was also popular, where readers could make monetary contributions to the blogger if they enjoyed their content, or purchase items from the blogger's wishlist on sites like Amazon.com. The boundary between consumption and production became more porous as blogging proliferated. Readers could reward the content producers they admired through direct engagement.

In the formative stages of blogging, two strains took hold. Barger's website, *Robot Wisdom*, utilized a more link-based approach, sifting through the various channels of the world wide web for content that was unique, different, and of interest to his audience, generally with some rationale for the link and commentary appended; this constituted logging the web, in his invented parlance. This outward-focused approach leads Julian Dibbell, in his essay “Portrait of a Blogger as a Young Man,” to view the weblog as a *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of wonders, a compilation of odd, unique items. In this he posits it is not a literary heritage that informs blogging, but more scientific curiosity (73). The blog, in his view, was a display case to collect and pin various personal curiosities. While this is applicable to Barger's experiments in web curation, and many that came after him, it is a very small lens to view the vast trove of the blogosphere. The protean nature of blogging makes imposing labels an imprecise task, as it is with the genre of the essay. As Dibbell notes, Barger usually added brief commentary to the links

he collected and proffered. This goes beyond sites that merely aggregate links. Barger's point of view, his commentary, is what made his site essential for readers. Dibbell does later concede toward the end of his piece that blogs can be claimed by those seeking the form's literary merits(76). While the image of the *Wunderkammer* is compelling, it is too static to account for the fullness of the blogging process. Links are not seashells or butterflies pinned under glass, and the constant forward momentum of blogging, of compiling and publishing texts and links, is more active, more a process of construction. A cabinet of curiosities, yes in part, but less a collection on display, even one that is being added to, and more of a journey through a gallery, a sense of motion. The *Wunderkammer*, like the practice of keeping a commonplace book, are antecedents and facets of that lineage of blogging for which Barger is an acknowledged pioneer. The commonplace book, a bound volume into which readers, typically the aristocracy, would copy favorite poems, quotations, and brief passages, often thematically ordered, has resonance with the way people utilize the Internet now, on sites like Pinterest, but doesn't quite parallel what blogging accomplishes (Keep). Sarah Bakewell posits that Montaigne's Essays may have begun with the intention of being a commonplace book (*How to Live* 31). These practices are echoed in the type of cultural commentary Barger participated in, and as the web evolved it resurrected, with variations, these outlying, outdated practices like the commonplace book and the *Wunderkammer*. The “link-blog” that became most

popular showcased personality-inflected pursuits, where the idiosyncratic tastes of the blogger were apparent in conjunction to the information they were highlighting and disseminating across their platform. A story was in the process of being constructed through the highlighting and publishing of links. It was a running tally, based around taste and opinion.

Like Barger's *Robot Wisdom*, Justin Hall's blog included links as well, but as his *Links.net* project evolved his writing took a more blithely confessional tone, nakedly divulging intimate details about his family life and his sexual relationships, while also including more mundane observations on art, music, sports, and his hobbies. There was a lack of awareness, or lack of concern, with the effect of these disclosures. As with most diaristic writing, Hall's project began as a noncommercial, personal venture. Yet, his efforts attracted a certain amount of notoriety, and visibility, and further, value, a metric now popularly employed in business termed the "attention economy" (Goldhaber). Hall's impetus to publish, lacking the foresight that the particular style of confessional would take hold of the Internet, proves that even in its nascent stage, blogging was tied to ideas of cultural value and translating personality into text and dispersing it into a wider public sphere. Concerns about the effects of this particular mode of confessional followed in the wake of his writing. Hall entered his experiment without the expectation of privacy. The notion that blogging was non-mainstream, obscure, and was the basis for detractors to lob their criticisms at the form when it gained

traction. It is that boundary that has, as online writing has continued, to be a source of concern for theorists and web practitioners.

What made writers choose the web as a venue for disclosure and personal reckoning, a project in public exploration of the self? In the beginning, the freshness of the enterprise of blogging, the lure of the new, superseded the thought that there would be consequence. If the participants themselves were viewing it in the moment, not from the perspective of looking back, then moving these attempts from the static page to the Internet didn't seem to have consequence. Can it be viewed as equal parts naiveté and narcissism? The “urge to publish” gravitates towards the most convenient medium available, and proliferates when the technology is simplified and readily accessible (Stefanac).

As Rebecca Blood notes in her introduction to *We've Got Blog*, “[W]eblogs are publications, designed to be read.” They are compositions meant to be dispersed, not private, closeted writing. That also accounts for the early criticism of blogs as amateurish. Once the phenomenon gained traction, detractors were quick to point to the low barrier of entry as a disservice to the flow of information that could potentially be made available. There were fears that the ramblings of fringe lunatics and basement-dwellers would be loosed upon the world wide web unfiltered. Uneducated pamphleteers would undoubtedly litter cyberspace with their stream-of-consciousness missives, creating unmediated anarchy in the digital square. Of course this is a top-down fear. In “Structuring a

Marketplace of Attention,” James G. Webster writes that “Despite the availability of infinite choice, a relative handful of outlets continue to dominate public attention” (29). Yet, there is a persistent optimism attached to the internet and the new digital public sphere. As John Naughton writes in his article for *The Observer* on the tenth anniversary of Blogger:

The long-term significance of Blogging is that it reverses a trend that had become increasingly worrying in an era dominated by mass media, namely the erosion of what the cultural critic Jurgen Habermas called "the public sphere" – an area where citizens gather to generate opinions and attitudes that affirm or challenge the actions of the state... Blogging has revived – and begun to expand – the public sphere, and in the process may revitalise our democracies.

It is essentially true that the blog format is intrinsically tied to the publishing technology that enables it, but it is no less true that a book is in some respects an archaic “content management system,” even though it is space-bound. Internet writing could be said to be “screen-bound.” Certainly it signals a shift in reader engagement with the text, but not the fundamental nature of the writing itself. What scholars of the blogosphere often fail to connect with, in scrutinizing the form, is the context in which the work, once being published, or in internet parlance, going live, exists. Crystal, an accomplished linguist, at times does not

connect the blog to the larger continuum of literary artifacts. The linguistic approach to blogging is relevant to solidifying traits of the form which resemble those of the essay and larger structures of narrative writing. Journalist Sarah Boxer, author of *Ultimate Blogs: Masterworks from the Wild Web*, notes in an interview that “when you strip blogs of their links and their timeliness, you do get to see something about the language of blogs that wouldn't be evident online” (“Finding the 'Ultimate Blogs’”). The statement brings up a valid point when evaluating texts generated by bloggers. As the interplay between print and digital media evolves, judging the work—and its value, its legitimacy--based on the format in which it appears, be it a book or a blog, becomes problematic.

The innate desire to participate in the discourse of public life, free of the barriers of entry such as status, class, and connections to a corporatized media, factored in. By all outward appearances professional blogs slot in with the mass-media products, and yet retain a freedom of expression without editorial constraint or a sanitization of content or modulation of the author's “voice.” The blog serves as a leveling tool. By the end of the twentieth century, in a homogenized media landscape, the act of publishing online had a patina of rebelliousness, or reclaiming, or in the case of the Internet, itself still underutilized and not fully understood by monolithic corporate culture, staking claim to a piece of the media landscape. There is agency in claiming ownership of the digital space. The freedom, or access, to the means of publication translates

into a freedom in the prose and tenor of expression. The speed at which one could publish, too, was non-standard. The process of revision and the editorial function became the sole responsibility of the blogger and he became not only author but editor, publisher, and ombudsman.

The results of this digital “land grab” were not always as utopian as promised, however. As Matthew Hindman state, echoing Webster's assertion, “those who control the act of transmission have the power in the online public sphere. In other words, audience matters. Not only are most bloggers not public, but they cannot become public without help from their more established colleagues” (281). Attention from the established media still counts, and information on blogs that isn't absorbed into the larger distribution platform of mainstream media and redistributed means those bloggers are not, in actuality, participating in the public conversation.

MONTAIGNE AND THE BIRTH OF A GENRE

The fascination with confessional writing, both in print and online, has led once again to an interest in Michel de Montaigne, father of the essay. As Sarah Bakewell suggests in her book *How to Live, or, A Life of Montaigne In One Question and Twenty Attempts*, successive generation interprets the Montaigne it wants to see, and ascribes a meaning to his *Essays*, from Pascal, the Libertines in the seventeenth century to the Romantics of the eighteenth-century and Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth, on to Virginia Woolf and modern interpreters (316-317). In trying to qualify the genre of the blog, authors and scholars have reached back to Montaigne as the spiritual forefather of the movement, a proto- or Ur-blogger, the patron saint of the weblog. The current fascination with self-expression and public disclosure via the internet has led to a reconsideration of the roots of these fundamental desires. The intent of this chapter is to unearth the legacy that Montaigne left with regards to the desire to not only document but publish the intimate thoughts and to explore the self as subject, raising questions of identity and how it is not fixed, but instead a project of accumulation and accretion. Like Montaigne's constant additions to and revisions of his book, the *Essays*, blogs demonstrate the same build-up of personal details, an amassing of personal fragments, which, when taken in full, also shows a movement through time.

It is necessary to establish the early history of the essay as it developed under Montaigne. The essay, a literary composition with a critical, analytical, or interpretive bent approaches its subject often with a subjective, personal point of view. Or, as defined by Samuel Johnson in his *Dictionary*, “A loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition” (qtd. in Newkirk 298). Montaigne's choice of the word “essai” to describe his undertaking, his personal and meditative compositions, connotes a struggle through one's own thoughts, feelings and prejudices to arrive at an authentic expression of personal beliefs or opinions. In “On experience” Montaigne writes, “I pronounce my sentences in disconnected clauses, as something which cannot be said at once all in one piece” (1222). Montaigne's sallies are loose and disjointed, as he prefers; a circuitous mental mapping.

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne published the first two books of his essays in 1580, a project he'd started writing in 1572. Eight years later, a new three volume edition, with significant added material, was published. The posthumous edition, from 1595, included further new material. As Thomas Newkirk explains, a practical motivation for Montaigne's publication and revision was based on the standards of copyright, such as they stood at the time. An author could maintain a ten year copyright and renew it if his work had been “augmented” (301). The problems that face authors now, with discussions of theft versus borrowing on the internet, were present in Montaigne's time as well. As Bakewell points out, since

copying was an acceptable literary practice, sections or excerpts of the *Essays* could be excised and published as standalone texts; the material could be cut, reordered, and put out with different attribution. Bakewell likens it to a “remix” and indeed, an associate of Montaigne's, Pierre Charron, distributed a depersonalized and restructured version of Montaigne's essays that became wildly successful. It was Marie de Gournay, Montaigne's literary executor, who published the collected *Essays* that more closely resembled the author's intent (*How to Live* 309-310). Still, the process continued and it is one that is grappled with, especially now. Remix is not always theft, unless it is. Bakewell mentions how several well-known works are released as abridgments, or reader-friendly editions. The works of Melville, Shakespeare, and Dickens, to name a few, have all received this treatment. Because some works are public domain, or the treatments and abridgments are sanctioned by the author's estate, they are authorized but not authoritative. Montaigne's own revisions, from the 1580 version to that of 1588, demonstrates that his observation of the self is not fixed, and the product, the *Essays*, is always a text-in-process; or the observed-life-in-progress. In “On the inconstancy of our actions,” Montaigne comments that “anyone who turns his prime attention on to himself will hardly ever find himself in the same state twice” (377). For Montaigne, his project was more a process of addition and expansion, rather than excision and deletion. As the self is in a constant state of flux, and redefinition, then the work, which is a reflection of its

author, is an unfinished product as well. Montaigne writes:

My first edition dates from fifteen hundred and eighty: I have long since grown old but not one inch wiser. “I” now and “I” then are certainly twain, but which “I” was better? I know nothing about that. If we were always progressing towards improvement, to be old would be a beautiful thing. But it is a drunkard's progress, formless, staggering, like reeds which the wind shakes as it fancies, haphazardly (qtd. in Newkirk, 304).

The *Essays* as a continuation of thought, not a definitive answer or a full scale remodeling, adds a timelessness to the endeavor. The speed of the internet, and the ability to cull, compile, and delete texts has caused heightened an anxiety about authorship and the stability of writing. If identity is constructed through language, then Montaigne's tendency to expound upon and add to his body of work matches the man. It is when the language, and texts, are recycled, broken up, refocused that the effect is perceived as deleterious, a blurring or destabilizing of identity. This is not something that adversely affects those who blog, but outside observers find it a troubling aspect. Again from “On the inconstancy of our actions,” he gives readers the sense of the author, the self, in constant renegotiation: “We are entirely made up of bit and pieces, woven together so diversely and so shapelessly that each one of them pulls its own way at every moment. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is

between us and other people" (380). Montaigne's writing has a timelessness, but the revisions call attention to the writing being a product of time. While each edition might be space-bound, the text is not static. "The Essays are at once Montaigne's recourse from time and themselves the creature of time" (O'Neill 16).

Concepts of drafting and versioning can be found in Montaigne's project.

In the introduction to the *Essays*, A.M. Sreech notes:

The essays were first divided into two books (a third followed later). Each book contains many chapters and each chapter contains many 'assays.' He himself never referred to his chapters as essays; his chapters were convenient groupings of several assays-- primarily 'assays' of a man called Michel de Montaigne. He soon discovered that very short chapters did not allow him enough scope for all the assays he wanted to make. He let his chapters grow longer. In the process he discovered the joys of digression and freedom from imposed order. And he found he could tackle deeper subjects more exhaustively (xv).

The posthumous, published edition of the *Essays* frequently delineate the material with the markers A, B, and C, which stand for the various iterations of the work: A is material written in 1580, 1582, or 1587, while B designates material from 1588 and C any additions that followed 1588 (Newkirk 299). "Revising earlier drafts of the essays over and over again, he added material as it occurred to him,

and made no attempt to box it into an artificial consistency. Within the space of a few lines, we might meet Montaigne as a young man, then as an older man with one foot in the grave, and then again as a middle-aged mayor bowed down by responsibilities” (Bakewell 36). This mosaic-like presentation of the self does not feel any less true or “authentic,” it is only more enriching for the reader. That there is no prescribed point of entry, no demanded way to approach the text, is one of its attributes. It is more like a network of texts, the one governing, cohesive factor being the author himself.

No writing happens in a vacuum. Montaigne acknowledged, frequently, that he was taking his literary cues from the works of philosopher-authors like Plutarch and Seneca. Yet, it was not a stylistic continuation, but a break, in contrast to the established rhetorical style of the time, the oration. (Hardison, Jr. 13-14). If the oration was an established formula, then the essay was an experiment, more witchcraft than science, more alchemical than empirical. Montaigne had the benefit of not being conscious of genre as he was the inventor of the form, or as Bakewell puts it, “he started a literary tradition of close inward observation that is now so familiar that it is hard to remember that it *is* a tradition” (*How to Live* 38). As a practice, he chose to assemble his ideas as running counter to any established format, and though Montaigne applied careful scrutiny to his own project, he judged the work on the terms he was inventing as it proceeded. A parallel can be drawn to the early days of the weblog, where the

perceived novelty of the enterprise preempted any attempts to associate it with a preexisting form. There is something inherently anti-linear about both Montaigne's *Essays* and blogs, the narrative secondary or subordinate. The story will develop in time, it will out, it does not have to be overseen. That does not imply that craft is absent. There is a careful absence of order in Montaigne's chapters. There are links and abutments, but the internal logic is one prescribed solely by the author himself (Frame 74). In that, the *Essays* are not defined by and outward system of order, but rather a consciously arbitrary one.

In constructing his work, Montaigne was in conversation with the authors and texts which preceded him and from which he drew. Montaigne's incorporation of quotations and use of anecdotal stories, allusions, is emblematic the postmodern theory of intertextuality. While the coinage is a twentieth century one, the practice is not. In terms of blogs, intertextuality, whether through hyperlinks or block quoting material, is a recognizable component. Greg Myers offers this definition in his book *The Discourse of Blogs and Wikis*.

“Intertextuality: An element of one text that takes its meaning from a reference to another text, for instance by quoting, echoing or linking” (166). Andrew Sullivan, again, brings up the similarity between Montaigne's intertextual references and that of the hyperlink:

Montaigne, for good measure, also peppered his essays with myriads of what bloggers would call external links. His own

thoughts are strewn with and complicated by the aphorisms and anecdotes of others. Scholars of the sources note that many of these “money quotes” were deliberately taken out of context, adding layers of irony to writing that was already saturated in empirical doubt.

The effect that Montaigne hoped to elicit is complicated. He acknowledges the debt to his literary mentors, yet, as Newkirk is keen to point out, “[Montaigne] invites us to an intimate equivalence, a friendship; he is not teaching us from a position of superiority but a rendering in a way that invites not assent but a conversational turn on our part” (310). This way of engaging texts, the conversation rather than the lecture, a horizontal approach versus one that is top-down, is one that is particularly recognizable in the rhetoric of blogs. What Sullivan seems to be saying, in reference to irony, is that this approach is a leveling one, and takes power away from what is supposed to be a revered text and grapples with it on a personal level – a notion that fits Montaigne's experiment and writers like Sullivan himself, turning writing into a conversation not a dictate or commandment.

That others might benefit from Montaigne—and thereby anyone else's—scrutinizing of the self and the human condition is not quantifiable. But it is nonetheless a worthwhile endeavor. Writing is not only an act of presentation, but self-preservation. Montaigne furthers the notion that nothing external can

proscribe for a person how they should be, as he states in the essay “On giving the lie,” writing, “I have not made my book any more than it has made me – a book of one substance with its author, proper to me and a limb of my life” (755). He is almost, in defending his practice, advocating a D.I.Y (Do It Yourself) art-for-art's-sake ethos: the work is important because the person creating it deems it important, and its purpose is inseparable from the person.

Montaigne did as much in creating a reading practice as he did in the invention of the genre of the essay. Like many bloggers now, Montaigne was not a writer by profession. His project in writing could, at the time, been called a avocational, as was much of early blogging. Montaigne's new way of writing forced a new way of reading, of dealing with a text and its author. The writing is a request for audience, for patience and indulgence in an experiment that does not have a definitive payoff.

Being the provenance of the individual, the essay invites challenges to claims of veracity. As Bakewell points out, one aspect that intrigued Montaigne was that “the observer is as unreliable as the observed” (*How to Live* 34). Much has been made about veracity on the internet, where identity and anonymity are frequently at loggerheads. Given that the reader is only interacting with the worldview Montaigne presents, does that make him an unreliable narrator? It seems that the essay demands a compact of trust between the author and the reader. The viewpoint shifts, but does it shift closer to or further from a kind of

truth? Disagreement does not justify claims of disingenuousness. John O'Neill writes of Montaigne:

He spoke in defense of speech as the fundamental bond of human society. He read and wrote in order to reveal the family of man from which each of us borrows, and which each of us recreates in himself. Montaigne spoke selfishly in order to ground his speech in the family, in friendship and in the incarnate words of living thought. It is only in these contexts, where thought, speech and embodiment overlap, that Montaigne is concerned with literary truth and falsity. Thus Montaigne's writing speaks to us as though in a conversation or a letter; and he is for ever telling us stories which engage us precisely because of their lively and artful proportions of brevity and fullness. Stories and anecdotes are frequent resources of the *Essays* precisely because they are inter-sensory instruments of human speech and community. They cannot be told without being shared; what they tell are lessons of truth and falsehood (24).

O'Neill touches on several of the issues relevant to the essay at large, mainly subjectivity and authorial aim. The essay is not journalism, it is less a reported text than a remembered one. Artful is a useful descriptor here, too. Not in the sense of deceit, but in the sense of craft. The image of a quilt is often applied

to the totality of Montaigne's writing, and it is from the assembled patches that the larger truth emerges. Whether each square is measured precisely, or is of the same quality, has less bearing than the completed work.

What Montaigne managed artfully, and which even the most basic blogging tends to mirror, is a sense of movement, a trajectory through his writing. Montaigne's processes of revisitation and revision are evident in the additions he made to the text of the *Essays* over his lifetime. While Montaigne's work is intensely self-aware, can that impetus to be seen reflected in blogs, even if the rationale behind it is not as far-reaching, or as stylized, as Montaigne's? Rebecca Blood's views on blogging echo this point:

Lacking a focus on the outside world, the blogger is compelled to share his world with whomever is reading...He may reflect on a book he is reading, or the behavior of someone on the bus...Or he may simply jot notes about his life: what work is like, what he had for dinner, what he thought of a recent movie. These fragments, pieced together over months, can provide an unexpectedly intimate view of what it is to be a particular individual in a particular place at a particular time (“Weblogs: A History” 13)

I would add that the blog, taken cumulatively, is both the intimate view of a particular time as Blood says, but also a movement through time. Intentional or not, blogging is, even in capturing the mundane and the prosaic, an act of

accumulation and accretion. It is an incrementally expanding text, with various points of entry or engagement. A mosaic, yes, but one that continues to grow.

Montaigne, in embarking on a project of the self, is keen to call attention to the development and process of that project within the work itself. This frank appeal to readers calls for them to notice the act of composition, and observe the handiwork, instructing them in how to interact with the text, and by proxy the author. Bloggers utilize a similar way of self-reference, and it is easy to point back to a previous blog post by linking back to it, taking the reader into the corpus of the blog.

Montaigne also calls attention to his own failings, the best defense being a good offense. With the recognition of vanity and self-scrutiny key elements at play in Montaigne's writing, he seems to be seeding his efforts with a subtle undercurrent of reproach, which comes of divulging the workings of one mind that tempers the pleasure of the writing experiment. It is one thing to record his observances, but publication puts them into the realm of the public, for consumption, for scrutiny, and judgment. Douglas Atkins' close read of Montaigne's essay "On practice" describes it as "nothing less than an apologia for essay writing" (23). There is embedded in Montaigne's project a need for justification of the writing, and writing about writing. Montaigne says:

They think that to linger over yourself is to be pleased with yourself, to haunt and frequent yourself is to hold yourself too dear.

That can happen. But that excess arises only in those who merely finger the surface of themselves; who see themselves only when business is over; who call it madness and idleness to be concerned with yourself; for whom enriching and constructing your character is to build castles in the air; who treat themselves as a third person, a stranger to themselves (426).

By the time of the ascendancy of blogging, having to justify the self as subject is not expressly one that has to be called out; it is implied, a secondary notion. Yet a nag of apology tends to creep into this unedited confessional writing at times, by those less confident than Montaigne. Even the best bloggers have at times tried to qualify their focus on their lives, the study of the prosaic. What has been sloughed off as a bloggy trait has root in Montaigne, and it seems hard to divorce the knowledge that one is proffering their beliefs for the reading public from a sense of embarrassment that might engender. Self-worth is tied to this mode of self-expression, at times. Montaigne deals with the problem with gentle mocking of his own faults, his tendency toward self-denigration. Newkirk points to the essay “On Educating Children,” where Montaigne writes that compared to his literary mentors, “I acknowledge myself to be so weak, so lumbering and so dull compared with such men, that I feel scorn and pity for myself” (qtd in Newkirk, 305). The continuation of Montaigne's project demonstrates that this concern is minimal. The good material will outweigh the bad. The sum will outweigh the

parts.

The divide between public and private, an even greater concern when approaching the work of Addison and Steele and the emergence of the public sphere, is still a theme embedded in the *Essays* and studies concerning Montaigne's work. Michael Hall, in "The Essay and Discovery," reasons that the supposed effortless composition in Montaigne's works is a conceit, one that grew as Montaigne viewed his project in terms of both the writing and the perceived audience. As Hall says, "the genre creates this tension between private and public" (82). This statement can be taken as an underlying part of the genre, the tension created during the interplay of private and public. He goes on to note that very act of writing, even for oneself, takes those ideas from the realm of the mind and by virtue of committing them to paper makes them literary texts, with the mechanics of language thought and use, and as such there is an implied audience. The more Montaigne wrote with this awareness, the more his writing became dialogic, and that is partly what makes the genre compelling (82). There is always an audience, even if it is an audience of one. Nakedness and artifice are the twin engines of engagement that power this genre. Audience is essential to the essay, and to the essayist. The essay not only contains trace elements of storytelling and the oral tradition, but expands upon them. Blogger AV Flox, writing on the maturation of the blog form sees this storytelling aspect as well:

The blog has stopped being a repository of adolescent,

underdeveloped feelings and has become a narrative, an exploration, and a journey. This is a return to the great tradition of story-telling. Instead of sitting around the glowing fire and listening to the great stories of those who came before unfold, we now sit in front of glowing boxes and share our own narratives.

Of course, when Montaigne himself conceived of the divide between public and private he was negotiating the balance between civic duty, as an aristocrat, and the work he was doing at home in his study. He was concerned with the ideas of solitude versus participation. Montaigne's public and private divide was between his external responsibilities and his internal ones. As he states, "Nature has vouchsafed us a great talent for keeping ourselves occupied when alone and often summons us to do so in order to teach us that we do owe a part of ourselves to society but that the best part we owe to ourselves" (755). Indeed it was his retreat from public life, as Bakewell notes, his "retirement" that led him to begin the writing project that would become the *Essays* (*How to Live* 31). Even in his private life, Montaigne was attended by servants, surrounded by staff. Privacy was an interior state, as much as it was a separation from other people.

The informality of the writing of Montaigne is a hallmark of the essay genre that has persisted through its evolution. As author and blogger Alexander Chee observes:

Internet content takes the core instability of [both the oral and

written] tradition—the thing that makes it problematic, as it were, or troubling, and fuses them. In the process it creates something that is neither and it makes it public and it increases the pace at which these ideas move.

The limits (or boons) of technology are not always apace with the human mind. According to Donald Frame, “The spoken flavor so notable in Montaigne's writing has several overlapping purposes—involvement of the reader, spontaneity, fidelity to the movement of his thought, and thus faithful self-portrayal—and many aspects.” Those aspects include the improvisational nature of his sentences, his incorporation of dialogue, and his use of imagery. And while Frame goes on to note that Montaigne rarely addresses the reader directly, it is often implied that the reader is invited into the conversation (90-91). There is an aspect of presence, in the authorial sense, but more so present-ness, that is foundational to Montaigne's *Essays* and the essay as genre.

Not only is the language a more raw expression of the authors intentions, sometimes even stream of consciousness, but there is the aspect of the language being a blend of speech and writing David Crystal writes in his analysis of writing on the Internet. (*Internet Linguistics* 19). This blending, while much more overt in electronic communication, is not solely a product of the web. Print, like electronic text, can in the hands of an author incorporate these aspects of informality and blended-ness. “There are several features of informal written

English which would be eliminated in a copy-edited version of such texts for publication,” Crystal writes, later noting how, before the emergence of standardized English in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the lax grammar and digressive style of web writing would hardly have been noticed (*Language and the Internet* 245).

The attempts to associate blogging with an established genre have led to quick associations between the author and the proliferation of confessional writing online. This is a sentiment that opens Sarah Bakewell's book, that the 21st century inclination to not only document, but share, through available technology, can rightly be linked to Montaigne. She asserts that writing about the self in order to connect to others is a cultural invention attributable to Montaigne (*How to Live* 3). Discussing the subject in the *Paris Review*, in a piece entitled “What Bloggers Owe Montaigne,” she writes:

The weekend newspapers are full of them. Our computer screens are full of them. They go by different names—columns, opinion pieces, diaries, blogs—but personal essays are alive and well in the twenty-first century...There seems no end to the appeal of the essayist's basic idea: that you can write spontaneously and ramblingly about yourself and your interests, and that the world will love you for it.

Love is a broad, bold sentiment, and a questionable intent. First one must be

noticed, then potentially embraced. Often public writing opens more avenues to scrutiny and abuse than wholesale ardor. As she speaks to the larger impulse to publish, Bakewell is correct. Not simply to record the thoughts and notions of the self, but to disseminate them to the larger public, is a key piece of Montaigne's legacy.

Indeed, several noted bloggers themselves have alluded to Montaigne as influencer of the form, as Andrew Sullivan does in his piece for the *Atlantic* "Why I Blog." He writes: "To blog is therefore to let go of your writing in a way, to hold it at arm's length, open it to scrutiny, allow it to float in the ether for a while, and to let others, as Montaigne did, pivot you toward relative truth." Sullivan doesn't outright connect writing with the self, but if the "I" is the subject of this type of writing, and often it is the basis or jumping off point, then he seems to be advocating for a level of self-scrutiny. This practice hearkens back to Montaigne, who managed to be both observer of the outer and interior world. As Montaigne writes in "On educating children," "my aim here is to reveal my own self, which may well be different tomorrow if I am initiated into some new business which changes me" (167). This sounds like the precursor to Sullivan's justification of the "pivot." Jeff Jarvis, pundit and proprietor of BuzzMachine.com, also makes reference to Montaigne in his book *Public Parts*, drawing on Bakewell's biography of Montaigne and connecting with the author's use of personal, immediate writing and a conversation held in public (141). He sees the impulse

to blog as a byproduct of available technology and the instinct to connect and share in public conversation innately Montaignian. While in a roundtable discussion on teaching the classical essay, published in the literary journal *Fourth Genre*, David Lazar notes that “[C]ontextualizing the blog as a form with precedents would seem to make sense for anyone writing in it” (Danko et al. 162). Anyone studying the blog would do well to find, as this chapter attempts, the proper context for the blog as it has taken shape. But beyond mere cosmetic nods, the superficial traits and tics that are inescapable features of personal writing, what can the practices established by Montaigne reveal about blogging, and the nature of confessional writing, its purpose, and whether the claims can be solidified? Blogging certainly exploits the medium in which it developed, but there is something more intrinsic, connected especially to early confessional writing, that takes it beyond a mere technological development in the craft of writing. Not to contradict Marshall McLuhan's dictate that “the medium is the message”—and the boosters of early blogging that cling to the anchor of web nativity when espousing the uniqueness of the blog-- the content in this case is not always the delivery system.

Studying Montaigne can ground ideas necessary in installing the blog in a genre: creating and defining an audience and the dialogic relationship between author and reader; the tone and style of personal writing, the conversational and self-referential; and lasting influence. Part of the difficulty in tethering blogs to

the genre of the essay comes from the difficulty in arriving at a precise definition of the essay itself. As quickly as one set of parameters is established it is just as soon contradicted. As it is a reflection of the author and his unique worldview, the essay is often all over the place, messy, hard to pin down. The essay is not a homogeneous, uniform thing. It is a source for as much consternation as contemplation, where content dictates form more often than the reverse. The essay, like the blog, is often a protean, slippery thing; discursive, recursive, the attempt—as the very name states-- to answer a question but not often a definitive conclusion. The varieties of the form of the essay, as it has evolved, are more apparent than the quintessential essay itself. As Donald Frame notes in his introduction to his translation of *Selected Essays*, “Montaigne's style, the essay style, was not immediately admired. It was original, casual, colloquial, and personal, in an age of literary imitation, formality, pedantry, and impersonality” (xxix). It was, at least initially, non-academic. Darts of criticism like these have been aimed at blog writing: navel-gaze-y, solipsistic, unformed. A challenge to the status quo—in literary form--can disorient readers’ familiarity when engagement is rote, familiar, and the content is viewed as emblematic of a sense of order. It leads to having to learn how to engage with the text, how to form meaning from the material. “The accidental order of the *Essays* conveys a lack of design and an absence of premeditation,” Ann Hartle writes in “The Essay as Self-knowledge.” “The order of the essays is not determined by an end that is known in advance”

(75). This is not dissimilar to the way one does blogging. Nor is it dissimilar to the way we consume information now, not in a linear fashion, but searching through networks and piecing information together to create a personal web of meaning, multiple strands woven together. A blog post might signal its textual changes to readers by bolding the words “update” or “edit” some clarification to the content, or the strike-through, a popular typographical marker which appears frequently online, and functions as a signal, rather than eliminate the text fully it lets the reader see the previous iteration, the correction. That is not always the case, however, as posts can be edited without any marker as to the subtle or not-so-subtle deletions or additions. The content reflects the author's intent at the time, but that can shift. It erodes the ideas of finality, of completeness. Though Montaigne's work was published, in book form, it feels unbound in a rhetorical sense. The integrity of the writing is not a function of an editor, but the author. To click on a tag or category on a blog, and be taken to all entries organized under that category, that topic cluster, readers might encounter the author at various points of their development, similar to encountering Montaigne's various stages of development. A blog does not necessarily promise a coherence of opinion. The ideas arranged by category, if they even abide by that arrangement, may be contradictory, or evolving. The arrangement of the texts, this clustering of information, has a nonlinear layout, but is more reflective of the intent of the author. One can track the advancement, or entrenchment, of the writer's thoughts.

An image, however chimerical, of the author begins to appear. It is a digital thought experiment. Frequently it transcends mere voyeurism, as there is nothing titillating about the quotidian. As Montaigne writes in his essay “On experience,” “The most beautiful of lives to my liking are those which conform to the common measure, human and ordinate, without miracles though and without rapture” (1269). A lasting legacy of Montaigne's is the richness of the interior, and that the quotidian, if mined, can be a fertile ground for knowledge and discovery, an idea that resonates with the early experiments in blogging.

THE CONVERSANT SELF, SOCIETY, AND THE BLOGOSPHERE

Transitioning from Montaigne's invention of the modern essay in the sixteenth century to the writing of Addison and Steele in the eighteenth century affords another perspective on the advancement of the genre, as well as the opportunity to uncover another foundational element, or branch, in the lineage of the blog. Germane to the discussion is the prevalence of the essay as a literary form in this period, and with its continued evolution the introduction of several key traits that have adhered to the informal essay. This chapter introduces key works related to the essay and eighteenth century culture with relation to publishing and public interaction with literary texts. William Hazlitt's "On the Periodical Essayists" provides the connection between Montaigne and Addison and Steele, taking into account the transition from inward-focused writing to societal observation, "the dramatic and conversational turn" as he puts it (quotidiana.org). Authors Denise Gigante and Erin Mackie point to the representations of personality in Addison and Steele's papers, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, and open up the discussion of character in the authorship of the essays, as well as locating where the narrative "I" is situated when it is mediated through a persona such as Addison's Mr. Spectator. Stuart Sherman's work on the diary and the diurnal structure of writing, as applied to this period, also speaks to the fundamentals of online publication utilizing blogging software. Exploring the tone

of the essays of Addison and Steele, and their purpose for engaging with a readership, is necessary for a discussion about the larger public sphere, which allows for the implications blogging and the online confessional style have on the digital public realm to be addressed.

If Montaigne's *Essays* lend to the blog their spirit, their tenor, then it is the work of Addison and Steele, the periodical essayists behind the *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* that encode the form of blogging with a sense of being a public product, and further the conversational model now present online. As Bonamy Dobrée wrote--and which still bears out--"That we are still under the influence of the eighteenth century is shown by the fact that there is a much more modern flavour about its writers than there is about those of the previous age" (17). A brief survey of the topics of interest surrounding the rise of the periodical essay in the eighteenth century seem suspiciously similar to the talking points raised by those that write about the culture and content of blogging: authorship, anon- and pseudonymity, audience, the divide between public and private, and publication. "Comparing the blogosphere of today to the 'public sphere' of eighteenth-century London seems like a fruitful comparison," notes Desirae Matherly (Danko et al. 162). Much in the way that bloggers have reached back to claim Montaigne, so too are there those who want to place Richard Steele in that role of proto-blogger, as Ben Hammersley does in a talk given at the Reboot 7 conference (Charman-Anderson). Hammersley casts Steele as the first blogger, and states that his paper,

The Tatler, was blog-like in its mission. All of which is to say now that blogging has existed in the public conscious for enough time, scholars and cultural sifters are keen to look backward to make connections.

Addison and Steele expand upon Montaigne's foregrounding of the self and further notions of presentation and persona, and as such they are the exemplars of the essayist in the eighteenth century. Montaigne pioneered the inward gaze of the essayist, while Addison and Steele added to the genre an outward reach, furthering the relationship Montaigne established between writer and reader, pushing it into a broader realm of interaction. The bridge from Montaigne to Addison and Steele and the periodical essayists, indeed the development of the essay from Montaigne through *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, and their subsequent imitators, is one addressed in William Hazlitt's "On the Periodical Essayists." Hazlitt, himself a successful practitioner of the genre, writes what is most like a cogent mission statement for the essay, one that is still applicable to the form at its most basic:

[I]t makes familiar with the world of men and women, records their actions, assigns their motives, exhibits their whims, characterises their pursuits in all their singular and endless variety, ridicules their absurdities, exposes their inconsistencies, 'holds the mirror up to nature, and shews the very age and body of the time its form and pressure;' takes minutes of our dress, air, looks, words, thoughts,

and actions; shews us what we are, and what we are not; plays the whole game of human life over before us, and by making us enlightened Spectators of its many-coloured scenes, enables us (if possible) to become tolerably reasonable agents in the one in which we have to perform a part (quotidiana.org).

What Hazlitt saw in Montaigne, the courageous observer, not the authoritative pedant, was a trait that made for the transition to the periodical essayists. Yet he notes a key advancement in the style of the essay, one which makes the periodical essay a second pillar in the foundation of blogging: “The French author is contented to describe the peculiarities of his own mind and constitution, which he does with a copious and unsparing hand. The English journalist good-naturedly lets you into the secret both of his own affairs and those of others.” This evolution speaks to the sociability of the form of the essay, not content only to know oneself, the natural curiosity of human nature begs to know what is happening with one's neighbors, indeed so far as the populace in general. Stylistically, there was a trade-off in this advancement, as “delightful dollops of social satire and topicality were imported into the personal essay under Addison and Steele's tutelage, while a certain amount of intimacy was lost” (*Art of the Personal Essay* xlviii). In his article “The Spectator Tradition and the Development of the Familiar Essay” Melvin R. Watson finds little commonality between the essay as devised by Montaigne and the practices of *The Spectator*. “[T]he ulterior purpose

of the eighteenth-century essay—to hold the mirror up to nature and reform society of its foibles if not its vices—is at variance with the familiar essay” (192). Watson defends the idea that Addison's pieces were class-focused in scope, while the familiar essay's reach is all-embracing. This is true to an extent. There is more commonality, though, between Montaigne and Addison than there is difference. Watson does concede that strictures of the time and medium in which he was writing, Addison “succeeded often in revealing the familiar essay spirit” (192).

What distinguishes *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* from their imitative brethren, and indeed what strengthens those periodicals, Hazlitt calls “the dramatic and conversational turn.” Setting the merits of Samuel Johnson's *Rambler* aside, or *The Idler* or other periodicals that followed closely at the heels of *The Spectator*, the “submarket of imitators” as described by Erin Mackie, the popularity of copycats and competitors serves to underline the point that these essays were trafficking in a kind of well-regarded attention, a social currency (42). As with the blogosphere, imitation is a form of transmission, and while the periodicals that borrowed stylistically from *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, genre creep did have the effect of promulgating the form, even if it diluted the uniqueness of the voice. While the premise of *The Spectator*, as laid out by Addison, may have been as an outsider and “looker-on,” (Mackie 30), the observer was keenly noticed by a public hungry for entertainment, and to catch a glimpse of themselves as reflected by the paper's commentary on their manners

and mores (Hardison 23). The idea of the conversational turn mentioned by Hazlitt is one that is deep-rooted in the essay and a useful reference point. It does have allusive similarity to the concept of the linguistic turn. And while Hazlitt was not speaking of the impact of language on historical or cultural objectivity, in referring to Montaigne and the philosophy of the self, and the subjectivity of self-presentation, it does call to mind the twentieth century literary and philosophical theories that are applicable to ideas of veracity and representation. The essay becomes the best model for how we articulate our individual natures now, through rigorous self-reflection and a sounding out of thoughts, motivations, and experiences.

It is the characteristic of conversation that Montaigne was able to introduce to the genre of the essay that kept it rooted in the personal, the familiar. The equalizing discourse is a trait which unites author and reader, and creates a space for the exchange of ideas rather than a hierarchical distribution of knowledge. What Hazlitt might also be alluding to is the pleasure value of the essay, which returns us to the idea of storytelling. The essay is less a lecture and more an entertainment--thought that in no way means it cannot be a serious endeavor. The candid tone, the informal rhetoric, the willingness to be wrong, these techniques heighten the conversational, convivial value of the writing, inviting the reader/author dynamic to flourish. It was through these sly, often ironic dispatches that Addison and Steele advanced their ideas on how the

populace should conduct themselves. Quoting Addison's writing in *The Spectator*, where he sets the form of the essay, and its characteristic looseness, against the “regularity of a Set Discourse,” Scott Black notes that “Representing the contingent and the new, the essay was the means by which the modern, as such, could apprehend itself” (26). It was timely as well as time-based. The essay as conversation piece, and conversation starter, was central to its advancement during the cultural reign of *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*. The essay, then, was the equivalent of eighteenth century “water cooler chat.”

The periodical essays present what Denise Gigante calls in her introduction to the anthology *The Great Age of the English Essay* “complex and sustained representations of personality” (xvi). Personalities are not only sustained, but more importantly, serialized. “The personal essayist,” Phillip Lopate writes, in contrast to the memoirist, “cannot assume that the reader will ever have read anything by him or her before, and so must reestablish a persona each time and embed it in a context by providing sufficient autobiographical background” (*The Art of the Personal Essay* xxix). This serial aspect, minting the self over and over again via textual transmission, is one carried out across the blogosphere daily. It is the same with the invention of a persona, the eliding of traits or the focus on one aspect in order to strengthen the writer's voice, or position, to carve out a space not merely personal, but distinctive.

It is worth a brief detour to note that the rise of the novel as a genre was

occurring at the same time as this high point of the periodical essay. The boundaries and definitions between fiction and nonfiction were porous and in this nascent moment undefined. At the time the essay was poised to become the longstanding literary form, but the novel—after initially being decried and dismissed--overtook that position in the popular imagination. The novel, in its inception, strove for verisimilitude, a representation of true life. In “The Pleasure of the Blog: The Early Novel, the Serial, and the Narrative Archive,” Kathleen Fitzpatrick explores the idea of whether the blog can be seen as akin to the early novel. She finds a connection not only in the structure and function of that pairing, but in the way the novel created anxieties about truth. The comparison is not incorrect, in that both forms do elicit a tension in the reader. However, of the forms of writing in the eighteenth century, the periodical essay is not only doing what Fitzpatrick claims in terms of having fictive elements, but it is in the interplay between author and audience, indeed the larger cultural conversation, that the periodical essay is a much more plausible precursor to the blog. These traits that the periodical essay shares with the novel, and the styles of writing in the eighteenth century, speak more to the mutability of genre at the time, but it is the elements present in the periodical essay that do more to inform blogging, especially as the practice moved from a pursuit of web outliers on the divide between amateur and professional and towards something more commercial, a larger reach. As Denise Gigante states, “The earliest novels in English sought to

straddle fantasy and fact, presenting themselves as historical accounts of real people” (xvi).

Essayists, meanwhile, were playing with the ideas of voice and persona, “character,” in their public output, reflecting the stated mission of their periodicals. As Erin Mackie notes in the introduction to *The Commerce of Everyday Life*, “The criticisms and prescriptions Steele and Addison advanced in [*The Tatler* and *The Spectator*] were mediated by a fictional, gently satiric persona” (4). This is possibly due in part to censorious government edicts, but more so to reinforce that idea of it being easier to offer criticism and correction behind a “mask.” Hazlitt concedes early in his essay that due to issues of censorship that taking on a fictional persona was at times necessary, but that by doing so greater truths could be revealed. The idea of speaking truths from an artificial remove is like the adage by Oscar Wilde: that “man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” These early ideas in association with the essay, of both anon- and pseudonymity, of voice, come to bear in discussing authorship and the essay. Richard Steele offers his rationale for choosing the guise of Isaac Bickerstaff when he publicly retires the persona in the final issue of *The Tatler*, No. 271: “The general purpose of the whole has been to recommend Truth, Innocence, Honor, and Virtue, as the Chief Ornaments of Life; but I considered that Severity of Manners was absolutely necessary to him who would censure others, and for that Reason, and that only,

chose to talk in a Mask” (Mackie 76). Addison's invention of Mr. Spectator, the impartial watcher of the world, gave his audience an essayist at even further remove. Of Mr. Spectator William Kinsley writes that “For him the most important sense is vision, the sense of observation, of measuring, of detachment—in short, of spectatorship” (485). The “I” of the essayist has now become the “eye”; the focus shifts from an interior gaze to an outward appraisal. “Thus I live in the World,” Addison writes in *The Spectator* No. 1, introducing the persona to the audience, “rather as a Spectator of Mankind, than as one of the Species” (Mackie 81).

The value of these personas is that they are relatively consistent. Amardeep Singh, who notes the similarity between the blog and 18th century periodicals, writes: “Blogging pseudonyms are generally not fleeting aliases but fixed public identities, which are strongly associated with a particular author's style and ethos” (21). This “public face” indicates the interplay between the desire to engage in the public discourse but still maintain an aspect of privacy. Does that make the any less truthful? As Patrick Madden notes, “Those small fictions of persona are not central to the *essaying*”(Danko et al. 156).

The Entertainment value of the essay was key in the period and social climate of eighteenth century London. If Montaigne debated with himself the value of his writing, and the effect on the reader, the periodical essayists had that concern at the forefront. Edwin Bowen surmises that these periodicals filled the

public need for comedic entertainment (13). This is similar to blogs being the source of entertainment for office dwellers, idling online. The public was a social one, and the essays of Addison and Steele were speaking to that readership. As Bonamy Dobrée writes in *English Essayists*, "Since *The Tatler*...which was mainly Steele's, and *The Spectator*...which was chiefly Addison's, were both newspapers, the essays had to be short, compact, and graceful. They had to be the sort of thing a man could pick up and read in the coffee-house while waiting for a friend, or when driving from one place to another; or that a woman could read while her hair was being dressed, or toy with at the breakfast table" (17). This brevity, and breeziness of delivery, is a stylistic holdover from Addison and Steele, a lasting contribution to the essay form.

Introducing the "character" of Mr. Spectator, *The Spectator* No. 1, Addison writes, "I have neither the time nor inclination to communicate the fullness of my heart in speech, I am resolved to do it in writing; and to print myself out, if possible, before I die" (Gigante 44). This phrase, "to print myself out...before I die," besides evoking a stirring image, is quite packed. Addison not only addresses the difference between speech and writing, with the spoken words perceived inability to fully explicate the fullness of one's self or interior (his heart), but also the directness and authorial control which the written word allows. With revealing the self through writing, one can disclose more, and in an uninterrupted sequence, than can be comfortably done in actual conversation.

Despite the conversationality, the mimicry of oral communication in the tone and style of the periodical essay—indeed the essay format in general—it is still a directed, controlled stream of information. Too, Addison bumps up against the notion of essay writing's experimental nature, in the Montaignian sense of an attempt or trial, when he writes “if possible.” The end of this experiment comes either with the end of the author’s life, and the success or failure of the attempt is delineated by that arbitrary deadline: death, or it is indicative of the “death” or cessation of the persona. In either case, both are keenly aware of time and of an attempt, through prose, to combat it. As Stuart Sherman notes in *Telling Time*, relating the persona of Mr. Spectator to the formula utilized by Samuel Pepys and his diary, “By its logic, each successive daily entry constitutes a piece of the self, and the aggregate contains the whole...Diarists stop writing only when they die, and to cease before that is in effect to die betimes” (137). The created persona of Mr. Spectator, encased within the project that is his periodical, will cease to be once he finishes producing his writing. The blog is not wholly a diary, but it has diaristic elements. These ideas of finality and ceasing are ones to address when looking at the web in terms of publication: the “404 – Not Found” error message, when a web page is searched for but no longer in existence. While nothing on the web remains wholly gone—Google cache is an unforgiving resource—and sites like the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine provide snapshots of sites as they existed from 1996 until the present, there is something to the abandoned, deleted

blog. This has been termed “link rot,” which is clicking on a hyperlink only to be led to a nonexistent page (Koehler). There is a lack of persistence, an ephemerality. It is not as finite as death, but it does reflect a death of that persona and a cessation of voice. That web project, and product, is defunct, and with it the thoughts, opinions, etc. of its creator. They are, in effect, dead betimes. Sure there is a bit of a sly wink to the reader embedded in that statement, but it makes it no less powerful.

In exploring periodical essays and the idea of public autobiography, Felicity Nussbaum's *The Autobiographical Subject* puts forth several key ideas that build upon the precepts established by Montaigne and inform the development of personal writing which can be reflected in the blog. The power of time is central to the works of personal writing that flourished during the moment Nussbaum examines. “[E]ighteenth century works of self-biography are less quests towards self-discovery in which the narrator reveals herself or himself than repetitive serial representations of particular moments held together by the narrative ‘I’”(18). It is the narrative “I,” as Nussbaum calls it, that I would argue has propelled the essay through all its iterations. The fragmentary nature of the essay is part of its makeup. The only structural unity that can be found in every essay is the mindset of the author, the “I,” whether that “I” is shockingly candid or mediated through a persona, the essay, as textual manifestation of thought, thought made type in the printed sense, can only be fundamentally the authors.

The authorial role, the central “I,” becomes performative. “The essay is inherently performative in a way that other genres aren't often expected or allowed to be,” says Shannon Lakanen (*Fourth Genre* 159). That is especially true online, where interaction with the audience can be swift and less static than print.

From *Telling Time*, Stuart Sherman writes of *The Spectator*:

From the vantage, though, of its first readers and its putative author, its most surprising innovations—its timing and persona—gave it the salient features of a diary, but of a diary turned inside out; the work not of a public or social figure composing a secret version of the self in single, sequestered manuscript, but of a wholly secretive sensibility imparting itself in print, to be read by a wide and varied public in the diurnal rhythm, and at the running moment, of its making (113-114).

There is much to draw from here. The image of a diary turned inside out is compelling, as is the dailiness of its being. There is a similarity with the blog, an inside out diary if anything. “[A] blog, unlike a diary, is instantly public,” to quote Andrew Sullivan from his piece “Why I Blog.” “It transforms this most personal and retrospective of forms into a painfully public and immediate one.” There is little filter but the filter of persona, if that, and presentation.

The focus of the eighteenth century periodical essayists was on social customs. As Edwin Bowen writes in “The Essay in the Eighteenth Century,” [W]e

find the essay, in its very inception, used as an instrument for the exhibition of the manners and customs of contemporary social life” (17). Indeed, that was the explicit mission of *The Tatler*, was the “reformation of manners and morals” according to Erin Mackie (1). Success depended on reaching the widest possible readership, the widest shot across the bow, even when the “voice” or character claimed to be outside, or above, the fray. This switch from reflective to active, to talking about the swirl of daily life, the essay became an endeavor that was part of the cycle of public awareness. Beyond offering opinions, they began shaping and influencing them. The idea of responding to current news and events is one of the ways in which blogging came more fully into notice. In the “Dedication to Mr. Maywaring,” Steele as Bickerstaff writes, “The general Purpose of this Paper, is to expose the false Arts of Life, to pull off the Disguises of Cunning, Vanity, and Affectation, and recommend a general Simplicity in our Dress, our Discourse, and our Behavior” (Mackie 47). With *The Spectator*, the desire to address and correct modern customs from the streets to behind bedroom doors grew.

The idea of audience, and conversationality, is key to the periodicals. Beyond Montaigne's implied readership, *The Spectator* and *The Tatler* employed the device of publishing letters, both real and contrived, from their readership (Mackie 4). Yet the author still controls the conversation, furthering the narrative and embedding, as noted, the subtle irony and wit to the proceedings. Addison, addressing the letters written to *The Spectator*, and critics of the practice writes:

These are they who say an Author is guilty of Falsehood, when he talks to the Publick of Manuscripts which he never saw, or describes Scenes of Action or Discourse in which he was never engaged. But these Gentlemen would do well to consider, there is not a Fable or Parable which ever was mad use of, that is not liable to this Exception; since nothing, according to this Notion, can be related innocently which was not once Matter of Fact. Besides, I think the most ordinary Reader may be able to discover, by my way of writing, what I deliver in these Occurrences as Truth, and what as Fiction” (Mackie 109)

Trust in the readership, that they can decode the differences between truth and artifice, or if it even matters at all, is the hallmark of an audience taught how to read as much as what they are reading. The reader, being both follower and consumer, and as established, participatory agent in the form, is schooled in the ways to properly parse the material, to speak the language as it were. It is this sense of “insideriness” that Addison and Steele cultivated in their readership, and that bloggers elicit. It is true with all forms of writing, but the personal nature of the essay inspires an ease of accessibility, and likely an allegiance, to the author. Similarly, once blogs became less of a subset of the internet, and more prevalent, their readership developed in the same fashion. As blog publisher Lockhart Steele says in an interview with the *New Yorker Observer*, “Once you’ve learned to

read one blog you can basically read every blog” (qtd. in Duray). The form is its own legend or key.

Practitioners of the form are always keen to comment on the form. In a piece discussing the essay published in issue no. 124 of *The Spectator*, Addison discusses the difference between serialized writing and collected: “An Essay Writer must practise in a Chymical Method, and give the Virtue of a full Draught in a few Drops. Were all books reduced thus to their Quintessence, many a bulky Author would make his Appearance in a Penny Paper: There would be scarce such a thing in Nature as a Folio” (Mackie 95). He goes on to address the purpose of the press, in its function to the public, arguing for the advantages of instruction in “Wisdom and Virtue” rather than political concerns; how to make better people, rather than politicians. Addison is advocating for a public discourse through print, for an exchange of ideas rather than having them kept away from public circulation, but “obtruded upon the Publick” (Mackie 96). The seeds of public discourse, of use of the essay—the manners and morals argument—and its use as a service to society, a populist spread of knowledge; it is a foundational tenet.

Notions of time and genre come into play in this argument. An engaged author and an engaged readership form a partnership, the temple of knowledge, or at least conventional wisdom, for the periodical essayist turns out to have been the coffee shop. The culture of the coffee shop and its importance in taking the writing from page to conversation, as a place of idea and discussion, has been

noted by several scholars of the periodical essay and theorists on the public sphere. Indeed, the conceit of *The Tatler*, initially, was that different sections, the dispatches, were datelined from the varied coffeehouses that made up London Society. Accordingly, as Richard Steele outlined, “all accounts of gallantry, pleasure, and entertainment would be dated from White's Chocolate-House; all discussions of poetry and the arts from Will's Coffee House; all learned commentary from the Graecian; all observations on foreign and domestic news from Saint James's; and miscellaneous though from his 'own apartment'” (Gigante xix). This practice was soon abandoned as the paper continued to evolve, but in locating the dispatches, rooting them, as it were, in an identifiable, familiar places, the effect was one of not only grounding the project in an imagined physical space, but it helped to create and reflect the type of reader the project wished to conjure. In the noted essay “The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction,” Walter Ong discusses the invention of audience, with reference to the beginning of the constructed reader, pointing towards Addison and Steele, “who assume a new fashionable intimacy among readers themselves and between all readers and the writer, achieved largely by casting readers as well as writer in the role of coffeehouse habitués” (14). Though Ong categorizes these foundations as journalistic rather than essayistic, the larger point applies. The mode of the periodical essay was inventing a readership, and a way to think of oneself as a reader in response to the essays, which would be one of the rationales for so many

imitators. That metric of attention is desired, and one wants alignment with one's own project. Further, each new genre, or subgenre, has the same outcome. The blog is no exception. Within the blogosphere, the lesson in how readers perceive themselves becomes even more evolved, as the distance between author and reader is both vaster and more porous.

There is writing to a reader, and writing to elicit a response. In looking towards interactions between readers and writers online, the early blogs could be seen as more Montaignean, in that writers put forth their ideas, but interactivity was more limited. With the invention and implementation of comment features in blogging software, blogs became more aligned with the Addison and Steele model of engagement, the comments themselves functioning, at times, like micro letters to the editor.

As Steve Himmer states in his paper “The Labyrinth Unbound: Weblogs as Literature”:

Calling a weblog “literary” does not require content that is about literature or even content that aims to be literature. It is not an attempt at categorizing one weblog and its author as more worthwhile in a canonical sense than any other. To the contrary, I propose that every weblog can be considered literary in the sense that it calls attention not only to what we read, but also to the unique way we read it.

The essay and the weblog each “call attention,” as Himmer states, to their form, their content, the author. The idea reiterates what Blood had stated about the blog being written to be read.

The time in which the periodical essay came to prominence is notable when discussing the public and private divide, as established by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Habermas was the one to locate the emergence and formation of the public sphere, and its attendant questions of society, the middle class, and civil discourse, in the eighteenth century. As Jeff Jarvis notes in his book *Public Parts*, “The similarities between the impact of change in the early modern period and today are striking. Then as now, new tools empower new actors to create in public and thus make publics” (73). We are almost in a time of hyper-publicness. That heightened ability to share, and the speed with which to do it, has only amplified the anxieties that arose concurrently with the formation of the public sphere. At the same time, contrary to cultural critics and privacy advocates, there are those that see no problem using these technologies as not only a public pulpit but also a confessional booth. The boundary is now so porous at times as to be invisible to those not looking for the distinction. It is no wonder that in 2008 “overshare” was chosen as Webster's Word of the Year, which is define as “to divulge excessive personal information, as in a blog or broadcast interview, prompting reactions

ranging from alarmed discomfort to approval.” The political and personal ramifications of this type of connected interaction are, if acknowledged, seen by some as part of the internet age; that not only constructing the self but self-appraisal is part and parcel of the experience. The audience created for this type of expression, has become more eager to consume it. Due to a lengthy essay published in the *New York Times Magazine*, Emily Gould became the poster child for the idea of “oversharing,” a term popularized by the publication of the article, and the focal point for the debate over the intimacy of that particular brand of web writing. Titled “Exposed,” the piece detailed Gould's affair and subsequent break-up with a fellow professional blogger at the website Gawker, events which she recorded online as they transpired. In rationalizing the web-examined life, Gould writes:

I think most people who maintain blogs are doing it for some of the same reasons I do: they like the idea that there's a place where a record of their existence is kept — a house with an always-open door where people who are looking for you can check on you, compare notes with you and tell you what they think of you.

Sometimes that house is messy, sometimes horrifyingly so. In real life, we wouldn't invite any passing stranger into these situations, but the remove of the Internet makes it seem O.K. Of course, some people have always been more naturally inclined toward

oversharing than others.

Tellingly, and not without irony, critics flooded the Times' website to express disapproval in the online comments section of the article, inciting so much vitriol that commenting was closed on the article (Tate). There are interesting conclusions to be drawn from the storm that erupted. There could be read a particular bias that the blogger, and the story, jumped “offline” onto the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, the implication being this kind of confessional is fine when relegated to the blogosphere, but to have it sanctioned by one of the nation's leading newspapers gives it too much “value.” Too, the claims of “all voice no story” were affixed to the situation. Alisa Quart, writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, says “Here we have a young woman who imagines that the stance of self-revelation creates a self rather than simply an audience for your sophomore year tattoos.” That the essay created this kind of uncomfortability among the media is indicative just how disruptive the confessional stance can be. Not only discomfiting, but the attendant attention that is lavished on the personality obscures the message, if there even is a message to begin with. There is an unease with the central tenet of the essay as warts—and-all extension of the self, when the “look at me” factor becomes pronounced. Quart goes on to write: “Gould is at the front flank of those who are turning us upside down by writing about their dogs and their make-out sessions and insisting that we make them stars—and we are partly responsible for doing so. In a desperate play for the

water bottle of youth, we the media attempt to rub some 'blogglow' on ourselves—attaching ourselves to blog culture, although not really understanding it.” There are several problem that present themselves: one of the media as inclusive, stagnated entity, where modulation of voice is more important than uniqueness, and a reading body that has come to accept only a certain pitch and tenor, and the tone-deafness of a media that tries to capitalize on a phenomenon that, as Quart right notes, it both disdains and fails to grasp. Gould concludes her piece as such:

Knowing that the worst of my online oversharing is still publicly accessible doesn't thrill me, but it doesn't scare me anymore either. I might hate my former self, but I don't want to destroy her, and in a way, I want to respect her decision to show the world her vulnerability. I'm willing to let that blog exist now as a sort of memorial to a time in my life when I thought my discoveries about myself and what I loved were special enough to merit sharing with the world immediately (“Exposed”).

That the shift in media would elicit such adverse reaction is puzzling, given that the conclusions drawn here seem in keeping with essays that have preceded it: the reflective voice, the attention to the self, writing about writing. There is the possibility that a female voice, writing in the confessional mode, is viewed negatively. Jeff Jarvis rightly addresses the open question left by Gould and the

oversharing conundrum, the Goldilocks and the Three Bears dilemma of the internet: “How much sharing is too much? How much is enough? Who's to say?” (123). One thing can be learned: the reader-as-confidant can just as quickly turn adversary.

The entire literary landscape into which blogging is to be considered is too fractious a space to have an upstart form like the blog, its merits, both societal and literary, still in debate, take a defining role, seeping into the public consciousness on the back of technology. It was technological advancement that brought the likes of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* to prominence: the technology of the newspaper. “The infrastructure of the press,” according to Scott Black, “was a condition of articulating a civil model of personhood defined by one's participation in a network of social relations. And it is the exigencies of this new technology, the need to sell papers to readers, that offers the terms with to begin defining that new ethos. Pleasure, curiosity, the restless desire for novelty, and the imagination are explained as the social glue—the terms of participation—by which a public defined by the reach of the press is held together” (30).

These “terms of participation” in public life as mentioned by Black have grown more widespread, and certainly at an accelerated clip, but have not fundamentally altered altogether. Technology has always fostered new avenues and means for expression. The ease and accessibility of transmission, the spread of these technologies is the byproduct of the desire to share. Often it is the

scrutiny of the technology that overtakes the investigation into the impulse that fosters it. The infrastructure of the press promised democratization and participation, becoming the “fourth estate.” Those same ideas could be the watchwords of the internet. The possibility that it could be fourth estate adjacent; serving as a rebirth of the ideals of the press that had been compromised or diluted by corporate interests, in effect as a watchdog of the watchdogs, was eagerly anticipated. That public interest, as it has played out more openly on the internet, and in tension with the more traditional media, has not always lived up to that promise. The gatekeepers are still in place and the spread of information from blogs to public consciousness is still subject to stops and checks. In Matthew Hindman's piece “What Is the Online Public Sphere Good For?” Hindman argues that the potentiality of online content for public-ness does not guarantee the result. “Therefore,” he writes, “those who control the act of transmission have the power in the online public sphere. In other words, audience matters. Not only are most bloggers not public, but they cannot become public without help from their more established colleagues” (281). He is, unfortunately, not altogether wrong in his assessment with regards to reach. The current multiplicity of channels of expression heightens amount of noise in relation to signal. Yet, information does rise to the surface, and voices from the margins do get heard. The internet is soapbox and megaphone both. The tenacity of these voices and willingness to participate can begin to erode the walls erected, if at first by calling attention to

them. If the idea of the mirror, as applied to the form of the essay, and thereby the blog, is still applicable, then these digital dispatches are doing their work, reflecting the inequalities inherent in the culture. Blogging may indeed be reshaping the notion of a mass sphere, even as its practices and ethos are being absorbed into the larger machine.

Interestingly, even Habermas, the father of the notion of the public sphere, gives the full scope of the internet short shrift. The following is from a 2006 talk delivered by him seems colored by a dismissal of the overall value of the online public sphere:

The rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics. Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication, when news groups crystallize around focal points of the quality press, for example, national newspapers and political magazines (qtd.. in Jarvis 75)

People, perhaps, have become too used to the notion of the corporate identity as mouthpiece, that the individuals who voice their ideas are seen as upstart, alien, unfamiliar. The mass has been mistaken for the individual so much so that there is a confusion of voice; authority has subverted authenticity. If Habermas himself

chooses not to recognize the digital public sphere beyond a limited effect, perhaps the internet is effecting a radical shift on the notion of the public sphere overall.

The public conversation of our era, allowing for a multiplicity of voices, is not as polite or homogenous as the one for which Habermas might be nostalgic.

Fragmentation, as Habermas mentions, might be the direction in which things are headed. Unfortunately, we don't have the long view of history when gauging the impact that digital writing has on culture and the public. As well, though it feels as if the internet has been omnipresent, and has already gone through several cycles of development, the depth of the impact of the digital on the ideas addressed in this paper is just now being sounded. Blogging, and the larger culture of the Internet, seem to make and unmake consensus in rapid succession.

In terms of pseudonymity, the unmasking of Jessica Cutler captivated interest of those that followed the blogosphere and illustrated that on the internet there is no guarantee of privacy. That she wrote under an alias didn't alter the events she was describing in detail. Cutler was a then-26-year-old Senate aide in Washington D.C. who cataloged her various interactions and sexual trysts with high-profile political operatives, many who paid her for sex, on a blog called *Washingtonienne*. As is the case where influential power brokers are being gossiped about, there was a race to unmask the author of that attention-getting blog. Ana Marie Cox, writing for the website *Wonkette*, a D.C gossip blog, helped expose Culter's true identity through a bit of online sleuthery. In the wake of her

outing, Cutler was let go from her position for using her work hours and resources to “to post unsuitable and offensive material to an Internet Web log” (Lieby).

Cutler was also served with a lawsuit alleging invasion of privacy by one of her former paramours. Tedra Osell, the academic and blogger formerly behind Bitch PhD, believes “eidolon” is more apt than “pseudonym” in describing the authorial process of semi-anonymous expression.

An eidolon is also a kind of ghost or, recalling Plato's *eidos*, an ideal; as the modern meaning of *eidos* suggests, the eidolon tends to be less individuated than a persona, expressing instead a broader sense of cultural or social identity. The essay periodical eidolon recalls the “death of Joseph Partridge in Swift's *Bickerstiff Papers* (the original of the *Tatler's* Bickerstiff) and brings to mind that the private and unknown—or, at least, nominally anonymous—writer and the public published author are distinct, yet connected. ...The eidolon links private identity to publication, though the precise nature of the relationship varies (qtd. in Singh 27)

In *Telling Time*, Stuart Sherman also mentions the term in referring to the work of Addison and Steele, noting that “Mr. Spectator is the first figure, real or feigned, to appear in print day by day, and is also the first print eidolon to define his whole character in terms of obsessively cultivated privacy about his own experience” (114). In addition to private identity, it is also possible to think of this

pseudonymous activity in terms of aspect: the nature or quality of the writing that is conveyed. It is always a representation, at a remove. As Fitzpatrick notes in her paper, “The blogger's voice, while self-created and self-creating, is never complete in itself...Instead, the blogself embodies many of the traits long attributed to the postmodern: radically decentered and fragmented, fully inhabiting a networked subjectivity” (177). It is somehow both an act of layering and disrobing, often in concert. Bloggers often create or gravitate towards specific niches or topics, defining one particular part of their life rather than trying to capture a total representation. Fashion bloggers, craft bloggers, and even the mommybloggers, of which Heather Armstrong, who writes *Dooce*, is the most recognizable. Content-wise, the niche blogger provides an interesting study in what people will and will not reveal online: to blog about sex but not faith, family but not politics. There is a compartmentalization which is enabled by the web and the idea of speaking to a narrow audience, the effect of “preaching to the choir.” The choice allows for focused expression, but then somehow also a limiting of self-appraisal. Whether it's an unconscious response to existing in a media-saturated environment or deliberate manipulation of personal biography is hard to quantify. Sarah Boxer, in her piece on blogs for the *New York Review of Books*, likens blogging to “a masked ball,” where one is free to tease, harangue, pander, be salacious, express dissent, all behind a scrim of anonymity. But a scrim, like its use in theater, is often used to reveal as well as conceal. Certain freedoms of

expression on the internet lead to an exposing of people's baser natures. The digital confessional also becomes a bully pulpit. The same impulse that spurs people to make disclosures also impels people to comment on those statements. As journalist and essayist Meghan Daum writes for the *Believer*, "These days, being attacked isn't just the result of saying something badly, it's the result of saying anything at all." To refer back to the quote by Wilde in context of the internet: give a man a mask online and he'll tell you truth, lies and anything in between. The argument won't necessarily be modulated.

Montaigne was writing about texts in relation to the scholarly texts of his education, Addison and Steele were writing about the texts of their contemporaries, bloggers are interacting with the whole of the mainstream media sources and the internet itself as a text, a cultural object, a linked network.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick, again, ties the notions of blogging to poststructuralism. The relationship between blogging and subjectivity, and the inherent fictiveness of personality, are represented in the genre of the blog. She writes that "if the blog is...an emergent literary form, it is a form that bears the possibility of transforming the relationship between the literary text and subjectivity" (178).

The blog, as a nascent form, can indeed offer texts which allow for the exploration of the self, as this study argues. It is possible that the proliferation of public texts erodes the prevailing paradigm of a central, stable literary playing field. Destabilizing as it may be at times, as Andrew Sullivan puts forth, blogs are

useful to the larger culture of writing, aiding not detracting from the traditional: “In some ways, blogging's gifts to our discourse make the skills of a good traditional writer more valuable, not less. The torrent of blogospheric insights, ideas, and arguments places a greater premium on the person who can finally make sense of it all, turning it into something more solid, lasting, and rewarding” (“Why I Blog”).

As demonstrated by Montaigne, and Addison and Steele, and essayists that followed after, the actions and implications have ever been the same, and a reaction guaranteed, regardless of the lens of theory applied. The quest to know and define the self is a present human drive. Yet with each advancement of technology, there is a tension: there is a sense of separation that becomes evident before it rights itself. The technology that often facilitates the desire to connect becomes the thing that stands in the way of connection. One result of digital publishing, and of trying to contextualize blogging in the genre of the essay, is that it has renewed interest in the works of Montaigne and Addison and Steele from a new perspective. It is evident that the issues located in the eighteenth century are still in play in the twenty first, as the notions of a public sphere, authorship, and authenticity, and the confessional are debated as vigorously now as when first presented. The ways in which those issues are addressed are clouded by those that cling to the “newness” of the technological implications of the internet, as opposed to the enduring impulses of citizens to utilize the technology

for personal means.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND ISSUES OF GENRE

The twentieth century is where the discussion of the genre of the essay becomes thorny. The essay was shunted to the side of the literary world in the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth, its development stunted but for a few masters of the form like Ralph Waldo Emerson, himself an admirer of Montaigne. It came to live in the realm of criticism and scholasticism, with the formal, critical essay dominating the field. Strong voices still took hold of the essay, like Virginia Woolf and George Orwell, but the genre itself suffered, becoming less utilized, less wily, and content to be sidelined for a time. Tethered now to criticism, and having shifted away from plumbing the depths of the self, as Montaigne did, or conversing with society, as Richard Steele and Joseph Addison popularized, the focus of the essay shifted to talking about life through the lens of discussing art. The essay occupied an uncomfortable slot in literature, and questions as to whether or not it was itself an art form arose, as well as its tenuous standing in academia. The critique can be an essay, but the essay, in its full flavor, is not solely critique. Somewhere, too, the essay had been shoehorned into the category of philosophy, a miscategorization from which several of the issues with identify the form arise. The essayist can be a philosopher but not all essays are philosophy. In this chapter, theories of the genre will be explored, utilizing the work of Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno. While both attacked the problem

from differing viewpoints, there is evidence of some commonality in their thinking. The essay as a repository for varied categories of writing will be addressed, in relation to the ideas presented by Phillip Lopate. This chapter will also consider the work of Joan Didion as an example of latter twentieth century writing, in which we can see associations with both Montaigne and Addison and Steele--the mirror and the scrim--as well as advancing the idea of writing as performance. Didion is also useful in furthering the discussion of the relationship between author and reader as established by Addison, the interactive boundary that becomes further porous in the blogosphere.

Theorists like Hungarian critic Georg Lukács and German philosopher Theodor Adorno were among those that took the task of defining the essay on its own merits. In his own epistolary attempt at rationalizing the shape and function of the genre, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," written in 1910 in the form of a letter to Leo Popper, Lukács naturally raises a fundamental question: "Why...do we read essays?" (2). Indeed. That query has yet to be solved. It is easily applied to blogs as well and it is one that the debate to the literary merit of blogging becomes more widespread, yet we keep asking. The same questions of form and function used to interrogate the essay in the early twentieth century are being applied to blogs in the twenty-first. Why do we read them? To flip the question from the motives of the author to that of the audience: Is it merely to fill time while we stare increasingly at screens? The textual equivalent of munching

on junk food, while waiting for the next full meal? Partly, sure. Lukács was concerned with genre beyond the question of authorship and the process of essaying. The problem is one of assigning a discipline to a chaotic thing. Lukács yokes the essay solely with criticism, which limits trying to answer the question surrounding the essay as a whole. Yet, the essay has always been the problem child, the quirky, smart-alecky outsider stomping his feet down the hushed halls of literature. As Reda Bensmaia states:

A unique case in the annals of literature, the Essay is the only literary genre to have resisted integration, until quite recently, into the taxonomy of genres. No other genre ever raised so many theoretical problems concerning the origin and definition of its Form: an atopic genre or, more precisely, an eccentric one insofar as it seems to flirt with all the genres without letting itself be pinned down, the literary essay such as Montaigne bequeathed it to posterity has always had a special status (96).

The inherent confusion of the form, and to what end that constrains or frees the content, is unsolvable but continually invites inquiry. Like the reclusive neighbor constantly banging away in his tool shed, the question is: “What’s he doing in there?” What is happening with form and content, the two puzzle pieces at play in discussions of the essay. Both Adorno and Lukács arrive at the central concern that has guided the essay since Montaigne, and that anyone who studies the form

eventually returns to (either to embrace or dismiss), that it is the always about the process of questioning, not providing the answer. As Lukács writes, “The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict...but the process of judging” (18).

Earlier in his essay Lukács claims that a mystical union “between the outer and inner, between soul and form” is the moment of destiny for the essay, a melding of these two extremes. By contrast, “Discontinuity is essential to the essay,” Adorno states, “its concern is always a conflict brought to a standstill. While the essay adjusts concepts to one another by virtue of their function...it shrinks back from the over-arching concept under which particular concepts should be subordinated; what the over-arching concept merely pretends to accomplish, the essay's method recognizes as insoluble while nevertheless attempting to accomplish it” (164). It is this underlying tension that inhabits the essay; it colors the methodology by which topics are addressed, explored, and weighed. It is the fundamental paradox of the essay: acknowledging a problem and seeking to address it, knowing all the while it is unanswerable. Or, as Ander Monson in his piece “Essay as Hack” aptly states: “I believe in the fragment. ...Of the literary forms, the essay is the most open to fragment. Because it tries to represent thinking, it knows only so much.” Kathleen Fitzpatrick raises an issue of why blogs are read, and what is gained: There is something attractive about the serialized representation of the self, the way in which it unfolds over time. She

quotes The New Kid in the Hallway, a blogger who likens being caught up in strangers' lives to that of watching a soap opera. This is one way to read the unfolding self: in installments, as entertainment. The blogger she quotes admits at times to thinking of those s/he read as “characters.” (178).

One issue that arises, too, is when genre is mistaken for a marketing tool. The personal essay, unwieldy and defiant at its core, does not often want to sit comfortably on a particular shelf, be it Memoir, Journalism, Self-Help, or the like, as Phillip Lopate notes in the article “The Essay Lives--in Disguise.” With need for the public to have these rigid associations, the essay is forever hokey-pokey-ing through different categories, one foot in, and one foot out (47). The un-specificity that makes a truly compelling essay transcend the rote is recognized by those who take the form to heart. Adorno concludes his assessment as follows: “[T]he law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy. By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy's secret purpose to keep invisible” (171). The differences between the two viewpoints are succinctly contrasted by Tom Huhn by way of his read on Lukács and Adorno:

Adorno's strategy, if we might call it that, is to argue that central to the essay is just that disjointedness within aesthetic judgment that Lukács would have the essay redeem through a mystical union. The temporality of the essay, for Adorno, is not a trajectory that

finds its goal and redemption in some sort of destiny, but rather seeks the opposite: to cut short and break off its continuity. The essay seeks self-effacement, not mystical resolution.

It is the untrammelled voice of the author, the self, free to roam the byways and circuitous trails of thought that have made the essay a compelling form on into our current century. The essay, under scrutiny, seems to always be running counter to prevailing modes and expectations. In “Stretching the Limits of the Essay” George Core writes, “The House of Literature has many mansions. The personal essay may not be the grandest of these, but it is solid and tight and respectable while providing as splendid view of human circumstance”(220). One might be tempted to locate blogging in the basement of the House of Literature, but its personal aspect is often the same as the essayists that Core extolls. He notes that the literary fold is more inclusive, inviting more and previously dismissed forms of writing. I would argue it could be forward thinking enough to embrace the personal literature of the blogosphere as well.

The modern essay is reflective of both an inner and outer crisis. Bungled and besmirched at times, a watered-down, pedagogical tool of the academy, used for gauging students' writing ability. “Essays are usually taught all wrong,” Phillip Lopate in the article “The Essay Lives-- in Disguise.” “[I]nstead of being celebrated for their delights as literature, they are harnessed to rhetoric and composition, in a two-birds-with-one-stone approach designed to sharpen the

students' skills at argumentative persuasion" (47). Alexander Butrym, in his introduction to *Essays on the Essay*, argues that the problem of the genre, beyond its scattershot parameters, is a lack of status. Especially in academic circles, he finds the essay hasn't received the critical attention of its literary counterparts (4-5). He has a fair point, though I'd argue that since the publication of his book, in 1989 and the rise of online writing, the interest in the essay has only increased, though that doesn't mean any of the questions surrounding the essay itself have been resolved. The form still elicits a certain amount of hand-wringing, in so far as how to approach, classify, and deal with the texts. Still, anxiety about the form of the essay, and those that write them, has been part of its makeup since its inception. As E.B. White said, "The essayist...must be content in his self-imposed role as second-class citizen" (*Art of the Personal Essay* xxxiii).

Yet the twentieth century has seen the rise of essayists of unparalleled insight, a return to the personal and the social, stepping away from academic and critical constraints and out of the musty corner office where it had been shoved in the ivory tower of academia; uncloistered, blinking back on to the streets and byways of cultural engagement, put back into service. Not that the essay can't function as a philosophical or critical apparatus, there is room under the genre tent, but to assign it solely those fields is limiting.

"Well tell ourselves stories in order to live," Joan Didion writes in the titular essay of *The White Album*. She concludes her opening paragraph with the

following: “We interpret what we see, select the most workable of multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience” (11). It hearkens back to what O.B. Hardison, Jr. wrote about Montaigne and the essay as genre: “The essay is the enactment of a process by which the soul realizes itself even as it is passing from day to day and from moment to moment. It is the literary response to a world that has become problematic” (20). It is the longed for expressive gesture, to interpret Lukács (7).

Joan Didion stands as an example of the modern essayist that both perpetuates the essence of Montaigne, and to an extent Addison and Steele in regards to writing on and a particular social and cultural climate at a particular moment, and advances the form to where it nearly grazes the blogosphere. It is Didion's direct indirectness that speaks to a modern sensibility. “In reading Joan Didion’s nonfiction, Mark Royden Winchell writes, “it is tempting to ignore the critical dictum that one should trust the tale and not the teller, for with Didion the two frequently overlap. Her writing seems to be a search for identity, an attempt to create a fictive persona with which to impose artistic coherence upon the randomness of life. What she strives for in the written word is what most of us strive for in a somewhat less deliberate and less verbal form—self-knowledge” (“How Many Miles” 1). This aligns with both the writing of Montaigne and

Addison and Steele, almost as a hybrid or blending of their two styles: It is the search for the self and the use of persona: the mirror and the scrim. Though with Didion, that persona is more difficult to gauge than that of Steele's Isaac Bickerstaff or Addison's Mr. Spectator. It is not a character; the persona is "Joan Didion," the quotations around the author implied in the narrative voice. As previously established, the awareness of the process of composition is prevalent in the essay, a recurring pattern in the form. Didion's "Why I write" is part Montaignian apologia, part explication, that at times echoes statements that Montaigne makes throughout his *Essays*. "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means," Didion states early in the piece (6). It is near to Montaigne's claim from "On practice": "I am chiefly portraying my ways of thinking, a shapeless subject which simply does not become manifest in deeds. I have to struggle to couch it in the flimsy medium of words" (425). Similarly, Didion makes no claims at intellectual superiority in her work, saying "Like many writers I have only this one 'subject,' this one 'area': the act of writing. I can bring you no reports from any other front. ...I am not a scholar. I am not in the least an intellectual" (5). Even in the titular construction of selections in section II, "Personals," of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* there are textual parallels with Montaigne: "On Morality"; "On Self-Respect"; "On Keeping a Notebook." They sound like pieces from Montaigne's own collection. Certainly she commits to the same rigorous self-scrutiny that Montaigne

practiced.

If we are to see Didion as a bridge between Montaigne, Addison and Steele, and bloggers, it is in the way that an awareness of the media environment in which the author is operating. The style shifts to an awareness of the act of writing as going beyond expression and into the realm of performance, bringing that part of the process to the fore, and explicitly acknowledging it. Didion herself, in an interview with Sheila Heti in *The Believer*, speaks specifically to writing as an act of “doing a performance.” It is not, though, a guise, but “appearing in public,” acknowledging the self in that arena of attention, fully aware of being observed. She also reinforces the idea of the synergy between author and reader. “The reader,” Didion says, “is your audience.” It is inherently collaborative. Each successive technological advance, from the printing press through the internet, seems to be pushing writing, or understanding of writing, in this direction. Less literary fiefdom and more commune, then? For some perhaps, however, Didion sees it differently, as more an intrusion on that shared space between writer and reader. “In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*. It's an aggressive, even a hostile act. ...setting words on paper is the tactic of a secret bully, an invasion, an imposition of the writer's sensibility on the reader's most private space” (5). The invitation to the reader, then, is really an imposition of the author. This imposition is one that Stuart Sherman sees in the

work of Addison's *Spectator*. “Mr. Spectator insists that he aspires not to mere proximity with his readers, nor even to ordinary intimacy, but a kind of self-infusion” (145).

This urge to impose, or at least converse, to tell one's story, is partially linked to the rise of the memoir at the end of the 1990s and its dominance in the bookselling marketplace (Leopold). The internet provided a vast, untapped space, and blogging technology created an easy means by which to publish easily and frequently. An imbalance begins when there is mass migration from consumption to production. In her conclusion to “Weblogs: A History and Perspective” Rebecca Blood writes “I strongly believe in the power of weblogs to transform both writers and readers from 'audience' to 'public' and from 'consumer' to 'creator’” (16). Yet, with everyone capable of publishing, and making ready use of the tools readily available, where goes the reader?

TOWARDS A LITERARY BLOGOSPHERE

The question of how the blog as personal text developed, is, as we've discovered, one that is only beginning to receive academic scrutiny, which raises several questions: where is the form heading, and is it sustainable? Are the traits and practices ingrained in blogging already out of fashion? And will newer technologies render the blog as vehicle for personal expression irrelevant? As web-based technologies for self-expression and interaction continue to evolve, the place of blogging in the online conversation continues to shift. The repercussions of a shift from an amateur to a professional blogging culture, and with it a loss of blogging's idiosyncratic voice(s), is addressed in this chapter. Beyond the idea of oversharing and disclosure, we will look at the trend of presenting the self online as a brand, and how that in effect depersonalizes the proffered content. Lastly, if blogs do establish generic stability, how will they be adopted into the literary firmament? Can blogs become canon, or is it more likely that they will fall victim to the same fate as the essay: being absorbed as a pedagogical tool rather than a creative endeavor.

Maud Newton, herself a blogger, traces the textual tics and the blend of speech and writing, in a piece she authored for the *New York Times* entitled "Another Thing to Sort of Pin on David Foster Wallace." She locates the tone and voice of the early blogosphere, and its holdovers, as indebted, for better or for ill,

to the essayist and novelist David Foster Wallace. The author, known for his hyper-literate writing, both discursive and self-referential, is a template for a number of online essayists, his use of footnotes not unlike a link-heavy online text. Newton writes:

In the Internet era, Wallace's moves have been adopted and further slackerized by a legion of opinion-mongers who not only lack his quick mind but seem not to have mastered the idea that to make an argument, you must, amid all the tap-dancing and hedging, actually lodge an argument. Visit some blogs — personal blogs, academic blogs, blogs associated with some of our most esteemed periodicals — to see these tendencies writ large. My own archives, dating back to 2002, are no exception.

I suppose it made sense, when blogging was new, that there was some confusion about voice. Was a blog more like writing or more like speech? Soon it became a contrived and shambling hybrid of the two. The “sort ofs” and “reallys” and “ums” and “you knows” that we use in conversation were codified as the central connectors in the blogger lexicon. We weren't just mad, we were sort of enraged; no one was merely confused, but kind of totally mystified. That music blog we liked was really pretty much the only one that, um, you know, got it. Never before had “folks” been used so

relentlessly and enthusiastically as a term of general address
outside church suppers, chain restaurants and family reunions.

This “confusion of voice,” and tendency to announce oneself to a perceived audience, is indeed one of the tics of blogging. However, that “contrived shambling,” whether effective or no, is a crucial part of the development of the blogging voice and a, however obvious, announcement of author to audience, an invite to the conversation. The stance is not so removed from either Montaigne or the persona of Mr. Spectator, in that it utilizes the conversational tics particular to the era it is written in to establish familiarity and undercut authority. The ironic stance of that particular salvo, the feigned surprise at an encountered readership, would not be out of place in the periodical essays. Granted, its overall effect if deployed haphazardly minimizes the impact of the writing, but it does underscore the rapport and familiarity inherent in online discourse.

The overlap of personal and professional online has led to writing secondary to the building of the online persona, or aspect. It has become less a means of expression than a means to an end.

Beyond the idea of oversharing and the writing to satisfy a niche audience, there has been a move in certain circles towards what's been termed as lifecasting, a total web immersion that incorporates video elements (vlogging), photos, and written entries. It is an experiment in life as cultural text, but beyond that is life as product. Lifecasting echoes much of the jargon of the field of marketing, and goes

beyond the confessional into establishing a "personal brand." The divisive face of the idea of personal brand building via the web is Julia Allison. Allison, a former dating columnist, rose to fame with the help of the media gossip site *Gawker*, where the readership, and the authors of posts about Allison, had a love-hate relationship with her relentless quest for publicity. Allison used the traction she gained to build up a level of internet celebrity, ratcheting up the level of presentation beyond what most internet users, who engage with sites like Facebook and Twitter, do in terms of public display through various web presences including *JuliaAllison.com*, *XOJulia.com* and *NonSociety*. Though hardly the first to use the internet as a vehicle for self-promotion—Ondi Timoner's documentary *We Live In Public*, which details the early lifecasting endeavors of internet pioneer Josh Harris—Allison was bent on capitalizing on naked self-promotion in a way that was distinctly connected to the internet. The difference between self-editing what is presented and the idea of "curating" the content of your life is a distinctly gray area. This is where the act of heightened blogging becomes performative. And if blogging is viewed through the lens of performance, then the act of "doing blogging" becomes more central than the content itself. One of the payoffs for Allison was a commercial contract, as well as a reality television pilot, but does that justify the price? When you turn yourself into a commodity, especially online, are you dehumanizing yourself in a way that is contrary to the ethos that made you begin sharing your life online initially?

Worth noting, Allison “quit” lifecasting. As she writes in a *New York Post* column, “Part of life is growing and changing. The problem with documenting your life in a public space is that when you grow and change, your persona from yesteryear remains. The person I am now is not the person I was five years ago.” There are shades of Gould's *New York Times* apologia here. Yet, something fundamentally shifts when the intention is from sharing the self with the audience to getting the audience to buy the self. While there are precedents related to the eighteenth century, the internet has moved the chess piece even further on the board. In the delicate dance between art and commerce, something is irrevocably lost. The “human brand” that Andrew Sullivan refers to in his article “Why I Blog” becomes synthetic.

Dividing the “professional Internet” into channels, or “verticals” is one way in which a more mainstream influence is exerted over the blogosphere. In the streamlining and commodification of blogs, they have gone from buffet to tasting menu. Perhaps this desire for a segregated, topic-delineated structure is cyclical as the purpose and form of the blog expands and contracts with public taste. Popular blogs like *The Huffington Post* and *BuzzFeed* have taken the idea of niche and erected boundaries, defining parameters. A quick survey of these sites finds every conceivable topic: Tech, Music, LGBT, Fashion, Politics, Cute Animals, and so on. The muddied waters now purified, but lose some of the personality of the original blogosphere. Whither the personal blog? While posts on sites like the

ones indicated are personality-inflected, indeed authors are hired because of their specific voice, there are now editorial strictures in place. The freedom of the blog, its Wild West aspect, is becoming efficiently tamed. The amateurish aspect of the blogosphere, its woolly, rough-edged charm, has been buffed. And the homogenization of the voice is a result. As previously mentioned, imitation was always a hallmark of the form, but it now outweighs innovation. This is not to discount the outliers and innovators who still adapt the technology to their personal vision. Writing in the postscript section on his website *SayEverything*, Scott Rosenberg appears confident in the persistence of the personal, or literary, blog in the face of increasing proliferation of so-called content farms and the professional web. He writes:

To this day, every successful blog is fueled by some blogger's unreasonable dedication to his or her subject. Such bloggers are true amateurs — writing out of love, and typically for love. The arrival of professional blogging, first at Nick Denton's Gawker Media and later from thousands of one-person shops and small startup companies, seemed to turn this model inside out. The writing was now for pay, and blogs began to measure their success using conventional media metrics — page views and ad impressions. But the work was still driven by the intersection of the bloggers' and the readers' passion for the blog's topic. Denton

described his method as “to take an obsession...and feed it.”

What Rosenberg is against is not the professionalization of content, but the de-personalization and focus on search engine optimization (SEO) with the goal of easy monetization. Rosenberg sees this model as having a short shelf life, despite companies like Demand Media and Associated Content corraling large portions of internet traffic. He places a greater emphasis on the personal and its likelihood to weather whatever shifts or trends dominate the portion of the blogosphere geared solely profit-making, which he says comes back to the reason that many people publish online in the first place: passion. “That’s why so much personal blog content survives for so long, as bloggers painstakingly ferry their archives from one publishing platform to another, while the back catalogs of so many commercial publishers vanish without a trace,” Rosenberg writes. “And that is why blogging will continue to thrive, as more ephemeral schemes for Web domination and profit-eking come and go.”

According to Phillip Lopate in his 1984 article “The Essay Lives--in Disguise,” the essay from its inception invoked a shared literary culture. That conversation transformed to a discussion of a shared popular culture. While acknowledging the faults of “the old high culture”--its exclusionary nature, for one—he remarks that without it “personal discourse has become more barren” (48). This critique could certainly be leveled to online discourse. The supposed egalitarian nature of the web can lead writers to dumb down content. As well, the

blog is moving further beyond written text, now. Visual aspects are overcoming the textual, and writers are interrogating the broader cultural texts more than print matter and the works of authors. A literacy with visual texts coexists with the written. It is worth remarking that a loss of language as expression, in favor of animated .GIFS can be deemed as devolving one. How accurately can the self be represented in this dwindling linguistic space? But smart adapters and creators ways of incorporating those in a meaningful way, use these tropes and trends that burble up from memes, or are propagated without context, to speak on a higher level. Hipster Runoff and Firmuhment are two recent examples of blogs that manage to go beyond the strictures of a particular platform or preconceived notions of what blogging is and how it is done. *Firmuhment*, a Tumblr blog run by Justin Wolfe, utilizes text and imagery, a blend of the confessional and the fictitious in a deceptively simple way, being called “the Internet's greatest long-form, scanned-written-word website” (Sicha). Whereas ostensible music blog *Hipster Runoff*, a satire site run by 'Carles'--scare quotes intentional-- offers a meta-commentary and a satirical parsing of the artificiality of internet culture, while appropriating IM speech and teenspeak in an arch way. Both are examples of unique voice that hasn't been sacrificed or stifled, and who would likely not, without the ability to self-publish online, reach a wide readership.

In her early survey of the effects of the transition to an online sphere, “Cyberspace Renaissance,” Leah Marcus makes the connection between the

anxiety of transition from oral to print culture in the Renaissance and that same sense of dread that accompanies the digital revolution. “It is both amusing and comforting to recognize how closely our uneasiness with the unleashing of previously fixed text into the nebulous free fall of cyberspace approximates the anxiety experienced by Renaissance authors as they surrendered their writings into what appeared to them as the impersonality and uncontrolled dispersal of print” (396). Anonymity, depersonalization, the added layer of separation from the text, that is words on screens, with the loss of tactile experience of holding printed matter, are effects of this transition. Marcus wrote, at the time, that “the computer cannot be comfortably held in the hand.” Oh how quickly that has changed. Smartphones, tablets, e-readers, all now facilitate a hand-held means of reading that weren't available at the time Marcus wrote her article (397). The assimilation of technology into our daily lives has not caused all these anxieties to abate, fully, nor has it solved the issues of authorship that Marcus also raises. If anything, the swift absorption of screens into our reading routines has led to a lack of questioning about the implications, save for publishers, whose interest is financial, and scholars, whose interest in the notions of authorship and textuality are grounded in literary theory. There is a nagging sense of depersonalization that comes with utilizing the internet, that extra layer of remove. As Walter Ong states, “writing is a technology” (*Orality and Literacy* 81). And yet, there the aspect of conversationality is embedded in the familiar essay and the blog, keeping it tied in

some way to the oral tradition. So the depth of remove does not overpower the essential desire. It is a fundamental yearning. The attempt to converse, to convey the self, across the technological divide is reassuring, but still subject to that push-pull tension. The notion of hybridity is discussed frequently in relation to the blog, and it seems that it is thus with the form and those in its genre lineage: It is a thing that is always between, never either-or, and the tension between the binaries of speech and writing; author and audience; authenticity and artifice; presentation and performance; form and content are ever-present.

With the contention of placement of the essay in the literary firmament, where does something so ephemeral and manipulatable as the blog fit? Can it be canonized, or is the breakdown of the idea of canon, the notion in contention, part of the evolution of literary objects in the twenty-first century? How will the collective memory of the internet work, beyond Google cache? Beyond a mere index, which texts are worth preserving, and who are the gatekeepers? *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines canon as follows:

A body of literary works traditionally regarded as the most important, significant, and worthy of study; those works of esp. Western literature considered to be established as being of the highest quality and most enduring value; the classics (now freq. in the canon). Also (usu. with qualifying word): such a body of literature in a particular language, or from a particular culture,

period, genre, etc.

As George Landow points out, the idea of a canon is linked to education; the texts must be teachable. What is or is not “teachable” or noteworthy is always subject to the shifting tides of cultural influence, taste, and ideology. (153). Canonicity might be too outmoded a notion when thinking about how to best address online writing.

The ability to constantly edit, and to delete in real time also gives the blog post the character of impermanence. It is writing always in flux. Then there is the nature of the web itself. It is both fundamentally democratic in principle and also essentially a popularity contest. The number of links or unique visitors, to a blog does not necessarily reflect the quality of the content. The metrics used to measure success on the web cannot be used, at least not exclusively, to determine what is or is not worthy of preserving as the best representation of the genre. A site like Quantcast is useful for advertisers, marketers, and media agencies, in terms of measuring traffic, but there is no algorithm devised to evaluate the actual efficacy of the content. Blog posts have already been anthologized by *New York Times* journalist Sarah Boxer in her book *Ultimate Blogs: Masterworks from the Wild Web*. In an interview with the *Star-Ledger*, Boxer notes that “when you strip blogs of their links and their timeliness, you do get to see something about the language of blogs that wouldn't be evident online.” Does that legitimize the genre, and does anthologizing the texts offline make them more or less of a part of a

literary continuum? Thomas Jones, critiquing “Ultimate Blogs” for the *London Review of Books*, thinks the contrary:

Books and blogs, if they’re doing their jobs properly, are as different as two kinds of published text can be. For one thing, creating a book takes many months, not to say years, and the process requires the participation of a whole chain of people besides the writer...A blogger can have an unedited post up on the web and available to readers within minutes of the idea popping into his head. A blog is non-linear, always unfinished, ever open. It can be indefinitely added to, rewritten, cut from, commented on. But more than that, a blog should be dense with hyperlinks, sending the reader off into the blogosphere and the rest of the internet along a chain of endlessly forking paths.

Yes, binding blogs into books, making them space-bound, can strip the form of its essential blogginess. Too, the sense of time, and timeliness, is distorted when select entries from the total range of the blog are culled and excerpted. Placing excerpts of one blog against another, or several in a collection like Boxer's, can tell us about these texts in relation to each other, and many work as stand-alone essays; on the other hand, there is a level of reduction when they aren't viewed in relation to the totality of the blog it derived from, given what we've discussed about the representation of a self through the mosaic-like network of online

writing. To recognize and preserve the texts as a corpus of blogs is a useful method to employ, but again, what is the organizing principle?

The issue of ascribing the blog to the generic affiliation of the essay is receiving a fair amount of attention and, as much as the thrust of the internet is forward thinking, the need—if there is a need—to categorize the blog is backward glancing. Indeed, many practitioners don't want to be associated with their stylistic forebears, however indebted they are in terms of style and form. In a chapter from *Genres in the Internet: Issues in the Theory of Genre*, Laurie McNeill looks at the associations of the blog with the diary and print culture, despite protestations of some blog enthusiasts to the contrary, many of whom argue that the blog cannot, nor should not, be defined. It is, as she posits, “practice and expectation” where the line between the blog and the diary becomes fuzzy. Beyond the status problems of the diary, its “long standing 'image problem' as artless and amateur, private and domestic...may plague bloggers who are trying to be taken seriously as producers in a new genre” (148). The issue goes beyond merely being a musty reminder of a “dying” print culture and a casual, dilettantish pursuit; it is the gendering of the form, the association with the feminine, that gives pause. Too, it is the contemporary cultural associations with the diary, not its own full history, that need to be viewed and contextualized. “While the diary was 'private' in that its circulation was limited, it was not 'secret' in the sense of 'for oneself alone,’” McNeill writes, weighing the four hundred year history of the

diary. That scenario was adopted during the Victorian era, where the public-private schism became more pronounced. “In other words, the idea(1) of the 'authentic' diary as private was a public construct, if not a fiction, that served public interest by separating public and private selves, writings, and performances (157). It is this lingering mindset, along with other nineteenth century qualms about authorship, selfhood, and the role of the individual, that are summoned up quite often when addressing issues of classifying internet writing. McNeill also refutes the egalitarian myth that powered much of the early hype of the blogosphere, where certain “A-List bloggers” command a greater percentage of attention. Perhaps then the internet not a true democracy, but instead a representative one...representatives elected based on popularity and the economy of attention. Or worse, the strata of a high school cafeteria.

She concludes, “The denial of the diary as an ancestral genre, then, may explain why bloggers feel an obligation to define the blog, but find it difficult to make one that does not call on existing forms” (158). Indeed, it is this revitalization of early, discarded forms of writing, which were swept to the sidelines in favor of the bulky, forceful novel, but if anything, the internet has reawakened our curiosity for those forms, and placed them in an ever-evolving continuum. Whereas McNeill categorizes blogs as personal diaries (157), Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd, in their article “Questions for genre theory from the blogosphere,” reach the conclusion that the blog, after an investigation into its form and

function, “is a technology, a medium, a constellation of affordances—and not a genre” (283). Their conclusion, though soundly reasoned, is unsatisfying. It calls back to the problems of categorization with which the essay, as discussed in this study, has been saddled. In all likelihood the blog, like its ancestral forbears, will be subject to similar sidelining and shuffling around as the effort to find a place for it in the repository of literary and aesthetic objects continues.

CONCLUSION

The blog finds itself in a strange cultural and literary moment. Some of the functionality and appeal has been dispersed to other, newer forms of online communication. Twitter, a microblogging service, dispenses news, updates, and witticisms in 140 character bursts. Facebook, with its wall posts, is the place to dissect the minutiae of the day, or overshare personal details. Tumblr, another microblogging platform, employs a reblog function, allowing users to repost content from another Tumblr blog effortlessly, making the dispersal of content easy, but focusing more on transmission than creation. There is something like a Xerox-effect in this functionality, the replication of images, or smatterings of text across the web, without much consideration. The aforementioned longform movement, which celebrates more lengthy, essayistic writing online, can be viewed as niche, or faddish. It is also a reaction to the condensing of the personal. Assumptions are still being made about literariness of blogging texts, and in many areas, again as a holdover from traditional media structures, the web is seen as lesser than print or as merely print-adjacent; “bonus content” to pad or augment the “real” writing of print media, with pay scales for online content reflective of that viewpoint.

If the thought experiment of likening Montaigne as the father of the blog, or Richard Steele, does anything, above and beyond creating webs of literary association

that connected these seemingly isolated moments, examining blogging does give credence to the outlying or formerly dismissed autobiographical forms of writing: the diary, the common place book, the journal, these rough assemblages of personality, and allows for a reappraisal of their value as literary texts, relaxing the stranglehold on what is and is not “literary.”

The internet is a capricious climate, and readers are presented with the paradox of a diminution of textual length matched with an increasingly outsize expression of personality, subject to the whims of a participatory culture where preferences swing back and forth at an increasingly rapid rate, like an over-caffeinated metronome, affecting taste and preference. The online public sphere has created new modes of discourse, ones that are not always as genteel and egalitarian as envisioned. Perhaps the fragment is the foundational unit now, of thought and of organization and the public may not be as discerning as it is reactionary and hyper-critical at times. Regardless, from relative brevity to textual sprawl, the advancement of and access to technology only aids the fundamental human desire to explore the self, as it is an inexhaustible subject, and to transmit that self to the broadest possible audience.

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