Not long ago I was invited to write a vade mecum into Arden, in the form of a guide to Shakespeare’s As You Like It. It was to be part of a series of short introductions to some of Shakespeare’s plays and other widely-read works of literature, aimed at readers, playgoers, actors, students, and aficionados rather than at academics. What appealed to me most about the invitation was the opportunity to write towards a different kind of reader than I usually do and in a different way than I usually do. I liked the idea of trying to say something about a play like As You Like It as a whole, in a single gesture, to introduce and conclude in one movement. It would be like, I thought, a lecture, in which you can launch a ninety-minute sortie into a play or a handful of poems, urging a sense of the forest by examining some of its trees. Like a lecture, I thought, the task of writing a guide to As You Like It would let me move fast and wander wide; as in a lecture, what I might claim would need to stand for the most part on its own. My arguments and observations would rest on their own persuasiveness, less on citations or the bubble reputation or other kinds of authority. The format of the series called for me to ask a set of broad questions and then to open some answers, a little like leading a seminar, but for one voice. I would get to try to make readers entertain the notions I raised as if they were theirs, even if just for a moment. The book would
make pictures of the whole play in single takes, aiming neither for narrow conclusivity nor comprehensiveness, but maybe instead for something like representivity or even suggestiveness. It might not be solidly buttressed with sources like a journal article, but it might be able to go further out on limbs. I took up the project as a challenge.

It was a challenge. It was hard not to fall back on all the inertia of scholarly habit, hard to resist the security of offloading references onto other writers who had treated things more fully or masterfully. It was hard to put ideas up for grabs and to try for the flexible back-and-forth of conversation, hard to keep that feel of shared testing of possibilities and the startling responsiveness of interlocutors. Drafts, messages, and phone calls passed back and forth between the commissioning editor and me: one part was too theoretical, another too lodged in historical contexts, another too single-minded in advancing its own claims or too blinkered about how other readers and writers had framed something before. And in the end, despite our attempts to find shared ground, the commissioning editor finally didn’t think what I had written fit into the series, and I didn’t want to try to make it fit in better than it did. I liked where the project had pushed me and I liked what I had done with it. I liked what I had said, even though what I had written was recognizably not an academic monograph or scholarly article. That it wasn’t, and that I couldn’t imagine it becoming one, was part of what I liked about it. I didn’t know what to do with it, but I knew I didn’t want to bury it. And so I sent it to the Dead Letter Office at punctum books.

What I had ended up writing as I tried to emulate talking, I now think, was an example of what Roland Barthes called “the ambiguous genre where the writing vies with the analysis,” an essay. I don’t mean this, obviously, in the sense that as teachers we regularly assign what we call essays to our students and regularly write them. An essay, as assigners almost ritualistically remind other readers and writers, is both an attempt and a testing, a trial of invention and judgment that follows through on a line of thought. Stripped of the security of footnotes and
pressed to write concisely to the point, I ended up stumbling onto these demands seriously and in all their distinct rigor. As a particular form of writing, the essay takes its name from Montaigne's famous attempts, although he traced its attentive, meandering shape back to writings by Seneca and Plutarch, as well as the drift of his own musings and conversations. But the impulse to essay may be said to take its cue from a question Montaigne asks, *Que sçay-je?*, “what do I know?” The phrase appears only once in the text of his *Essais*, when he notes that he bears it, with the image of a balance, as his device. Montaigne may have had a medal made of this emblem during the years he was writing his earliest essays, so perhaps he means literally that he carried his question with him. It isn’t hard to imagine him handling it as he wrote in his library, as a kind of all-but-unuttered subtext to his writing. In the essay as printed in 1588, Montaigne follows *Que sçay-je?* with *Voylà!*, as if holding the medal up and asking the reader to take a look. Later, annotating his own copy of the printed book, he strikes *Voylà!* through, and the imagined medal recedes into language.

Montaigne’s leading question was his version of the skeptical assertions of doubt that were among the aphorisms written in Greek and Latin on the rafters of his library. It might also respond to Aristotle’s statement in *Metaphysics* that philosophy begins in wonder and unknowing. But where Aristotle’s man who wonders and does not know something works to bring himself from ignorance to knowledge, Montaigne refuses even to be sure of his ignorance and insists on asking. Not knowing is better grasped, Montaigne says, by asking than by asserting. *Que sçay-je?* The question presents a picture in which knowing and not-knowing are less neatly separated, certainly less likely to be opposite. Anyone who asks it is pushed to explore the edges and depths of his or her ignorance, and also to account for what he or she does know. The essay in this tradition is a detailing of one’s ignorance, and one’s knowledge, in their shadowy and shifting irregularity. It does not look for a one-way flight from unknowing; it tries to sound out the messy contours of beliefs, assumptions, curiosities, and blind spots. Theodor
As If

Adorno observes that “in the emphatic essay thought divests itself of the traditional idea of truth.” By a traditional idea of truth Adorno seems to mean something like being objectively right. But neither does the essay, Adorno insists, merely express an idiosyncratic perspective, however carefully. It adumbrates things which only become visible from particular perspectives, in parts and fleetingly. Without becoming fictional or fantastic, an essay tries to follow the limits of traditional ideas of truth and to illuminate other ways of being truthful.

An essay in this trying tradition lays out lines of thought that are not exhaustive. It extends its feeling of wonder not to everything and not systematically, but adventitiously to anything and as fully as it can according to whatever traces it discovers as it goes. An essay, as Adorno also noted, is uninterested in reaching after universals, origins, or absolutes. It engages contingencies. It may be erudite, or not, but not encyclopedic. It begins wherever it is, taking up whatever text or context it finds itself engaged with, and any truths it coins depend on those accidents and happenstances; it “cunningly anchors itself in texts as though they were simply there and had authority.” Released from the demand to secure its starting points, taking other bearings, it is freed to seek other headings than other kinds of writing. It follows its texts and contexts where they lead. It responds to each eventuality it addresses wholeheartedly, as if whatever question it asked were all there were to answer, but unlike a conventional scholars’ treatment of a problem, it makes no pledge of completeness, either of its treatment or of its topic.

Kenneth Burke’s Language as Symbolic Action or Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism, both of which are subtitled essays, perhaps really do try to explain everything on the basis of the questions they ask, as if each offered readers a kind of literary Theory of Everything. The vivid, inset images of Jacob Burckhardt’s flickeringly evocative Culture of the Renaissance in Italy, which also calls itself an essay, read as more designedly fragmented, and essays like Montaigne’s or Barthes’s are more obviously fugitive still. In each of these essays or collections of essays (the difficulty in telling the difference is itself telling),
conclusions are offered only through what is provisional and opportunistic. Essaying in this vein doesn’t require setting limits between questions, but loosening them. Essaying, it is hard to predict how thought will need to turn as it follows its own course, what unanticipated questions will be raised in the following out of others, what will be included as it proceeds, because it does not work within a field determined ahead of time. Problem and response alike flash up in moments of uncertainty. One realization I came to in my essaying is that Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* may itself be approached as a collection of essays enacted by its characters, a group of experiments that test how the world might be other than it is. The play — and could “play” itself translate “essay”? — is in a way its own guide to the essay and its applications.

My essay on *As You Like It*, if that is what it is, touches on much that is basic, much that is familiar or commonplace, in part because of the circumstances in which it was written, but in part, too, because some of those familiar questions seem to me the ones I most wanted to answer about this play and the kind of problem that eluded the writing I undertake more often. I was able to ask them because I tried to write as if *As You Like It* were simply there and had authority. My essay does not try to say everything about *As You Like It*, but rather to take up the questions it does engage as if each in turn was what most demanded to be answered. It does not make a claim to comprehensiveness or conclusiveness, as a commentary or a monograph could, maybe even should. It is a guide to *As You Like It*, but like any reader I acknowledge that there are other ways in.


— W.N.W.

Weekapaug