

Alternatives to explanation

According to my computer, I wrote the following text on April 6, 1996. Although I dimly recall the act of writing this, I don't remember what prompted it, nor do I remember how long I worked on this text. It has the air of having been put together on the spur of the moment.

Background. I often say that I have little interest in explaining things anymore. Music is alive and magical; explanation kills the magic, and hence the music. Nevertheless, music criticism (and its high-brow cousin "musicological discourse") have always been largely concerned with explaining music — so much so that it is at times difficult to think of what else you could do.

It was thinking about these things that prompted the following text, I believe. I only rediscovered it recently, while reviewing old writing on New Year's Day. Some of it is obscure to me now (number 6, especially).

James Pritchett
Griggstown, 13 January 1997

Alternatives to explanation

1. Don't write at all. Don't say a word. Be communicative by remaining silent.
2. Describe things, but as soon as you think about illuminating the whys and wherefores, stop. Go back over your writing. If you find that you slipped up, remove the offending passages.
3. Walk, walk, walk. Sooner or later something will distract you.
4. Make your writing so intensely personal that no one would even think that you were trying to explain something.
5. Confront your need to explain. Know where the thing is that you want to explain and then avoid it at all costs. Write around it, but never touch it. It will glow the way that phosphorescent fish in the water do.
6. There's always more than one route to the same place; another way to say this is that multiple routes go to the same place. Find one of the other routes to the thing and describe it. Your reader will wind up in the same place, as if by magic.
7. Tell a story, but don't say why.

— Princeton, 6 April 1996