

G. DOUGLAS ATKINS

# ON THE FAMILIAR

## ESSAY

CHALLENGING ACADEMIC ORTHODOXIES



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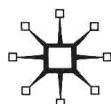
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Challenging Academic Orthodoxies

*G. Douglas Atkins*



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ON THE FAMILIAR ESSAY

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*For my students past and present in English 555 and English 753*

## PREFACE

I write here, these words “bred/By reading” (John Dryden, *Religio Laici*), for a diverse, “miscellaneous” audience. I could not but write in essay form, because of both the breadth and difference of the audience for whom I write and my long-held belief that art requires of its commentary an *answerable style*. Readers already familiar with the essay, its glories and its opportunities and potential, will, I hope, benefit from these further explorations, extending well beyond the territory mapped in my previous books, *Estranging the Familiar: Toward a Revitalized Critical Writing*, *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth*, and *Reading Essays: An Invitation*. Those less familiar or even unfamiliar with essays will find a concerted effort to demonstrate the meaning and the significance, the capacity and the applicability, the *dulce* and the *utile*, of this venerable and protean form of writing. To meet and get to know the essay is to like essays, even to want to write them, perhaps once in a while also to write about them, in response and appreciation, affirming life’s newness and joy.

My first book on the essay, *Estranging the Familiar*, published nearly twenty years ago, did not adequately address, I now realize, the relationship between the strange and the familiar, inclined to elevate the former at the expense of the latter. Like so many others in this self-besotted age, starving for the personal in a culture ever more impersonal, I did not so much overlook the familiar as minimize it, derelict in treating the ordinary, of whose necessity and on whose foundations the extra-ordinary is borne. Thus, I missed the centrality of site and undervalued intersection. The essay here titled “Envisioning the Stranger’s Heart” attempts to correct that imbalance, directly addressing the relation of the familiar and the strange, proposing, in fact, the essay as a form that enables precisely the familiarizing of the strange(r).

The familiar essay offers a needed alternative to self-expression and self-aggrandizement. The personal essay is thoroughly modern—its “founder” Michel de Montaigne said to be “our contemporary” (Monroe K. Spears). I sometimes think of it, unfairly to be sure, as smacking of that allegorical Spider in Jonathan Swift’s satire on the

Ancients versus the Moderns titled *The Battle of the Books*; there the Spider spins its webs out of its own innards, reliant upon little but the self (in another satire, the better-known *A Tale of a Tub*, the modern hack-writer, enacts modernism, vowing essentially to “write upon *Nothing*”). The familiar essay, on the other hand, smacks of Swift’s Bee, which, “by an universal range, with long search, much study, true judgment, and distinction of things, brings home honey and wax.” As much as I prefer the Bee, and believe the familiar the essential form of the essay, I do not mean to disparage the personal (Spiders are another matter altogether). *About* something other than the self, which nevertheless does the observing (unlike the personal essay, which trains observation on the self), the form of the essay I am considering here, and advocating, treats not only familiar subject matter of direct and immediate interest and relevance to every person qua person, but also readily recognizable, everyday, ordinary situations, feelings, and thoughts—and does so in a manner and style both accessible and hardly strange. The difference between the two major kinds of essay appears in the titles that so often grace the familiar sort, the tiny prepositions “on” and “of” signaling that the essay is *about* this or that idea or problem or matter and not simply the writer’s life or some slice thereof.

The familiar essay allows us to see and appreciate, as I have suggested, the ordinary, and not just the ordinary but also the intersection of the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, experience and meaning, time and timelessness. Confronting the faddish and merely fashionable, and exposing them, the familiar essay does not flaunt its (badly needed and sadly lacking) alternative values; instead, it embodies them. The essay thus “foregrounds” the unworkable and leaves *to emerge* the practical, the reasonable, and “the way things have been done for a hundred thousand years” (Hilaire Belloc, “The Mowing of a Field”). The familiar essay, therefore, for these and other reasons, stands as a potentially effective pedagogical gift and a cultural opportunity of no mean value.

Because essays comprise these chapters, I do not argue for or push a thesis, in the way that monographs do, but rather explore, set out upon a journey of discovery. Rather than proceed in strictly linear or purely logical fashion, or pretend to offer a systematic treatment, I deliberately roam around issues involving the familiar essay. The first chapter is, however, crucial, for in it I attempt to establish differences between the two major subforms of the essay. The next

chapters explore aspects, features, and capacities of the familiar essay, with particular attention to the form's moral and religious relations. Next comes a section in which I offer detailed consideration of E.B. White, America's greatest practitioner of the familiar essay; I focus on White's treatment of time, the essay's characteristic subject, and his fundamental concern with living "the good life." My readings of White may well be the first sustained analyses of his work as essayist, and I take a perhaps surprising approach by reading these essays in comparison with the familiar-critical essays of T.S. Eliot. If justification be needed for bringing together White and Eliot, I might point out, to begin with, that White's essays share with *Walden* what he calls "religious feeling without religious images," and so while White may not exactly beg for comparison with Eliot, he does, perhaps surprisingly enough, invite it. I conclude this section, with a close comparison focusing on the differences between these essayists and the differences that their differences make.

I am especially interested, as I have been since *Estranging the Familiar* nearly two decades ago, in enlivening literary commentary and so explore the positive relations of the critical and the familiar essay, rather immodestly proposing a familiar criticism (different from that personal criticism I had embraced in the earlier book). Critical writing will not improve—become interesting, graceful, or even readable—until it transcends or skirts its merely utilitarian obligation and recognizes itself as a *made-thing*, not a work of art, necessarily, but writing crafted because the writing itself matters. After exploring the crucial parallels between the essay and criticism, I take up several topics in literary criticism to which the familiar essay relates in essential, and largely unexplored, ways. Finally, I approach close with a series of essays reflecting upon the place of the (familiar) essay in the academy and propose some particular uses for the essay in (post-)modern education, focusing on its arguably unique capacity for "the making of persons." Here I explore the familiar essay's way of civility, its inculcation of manners, and its deliberative opposition to violence: art vs. anger.

I wrote a couple of decades ago, in my first essay on the essay, of the essayist as "gardening for love." In a sense, I return here to that beginning and (begin to) know it for the first time.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These essays, my life, are, indeed, a labor of love—not “labor” either so much as response, in deep gratitude and with heartfelt thanks. I owe specific, special, and long-standing debts to my wife Rebecca, always a champion, not least of me, always supportive and encouraging, never giving less than her all; my daughter Leslie, her husband Craig, and my granddaughter Kate—their love is unconditional, unquestioning, and pure; my son Christopher, his wife Sharon, and my grandson Oliver—their love too is unconditional, unquestioning, and pure; special friends, beloved students past and present, accomplished fellow essayists, who have taught me so much about essaying (to be), including Tod Marshall, Steve Faulkner, Dan Martin, Cara McConnell, Nedra Rogers, Courtney Pigott, Maria Polonchek, Kari Jackson, Katie Savage, Nikk Nelson, Annie McEnroe, Chris Arthur, Geoffrey Hartman, Scott Russell Sanders, Sam Pickering, Lydia Fakundiny, Katie Sears, Brigitte Bernagozzi. I also need—and wish—to express special thanks to a remarkably supportive and helpful editorial and production staff at Palgrave Macmillan, notably including Brigitte Shull, Lee Norton, and Erin Ivy, the last of whom is a former student, gracious advocate, and special friend. I am very grateful to Patricia Harkin for the meticulous, critical, yet sympathetic reading of the manuscript, which helped me make this a better book. I have been truly blessed. It is time that I *gave*.

I am torn—“conflicted” is the word these days—about mentioning, again, the incident that changed my professional life, and, in more than one important way, my personal life as well: the charges of plagiarism leveled against my first book, thirty years ago, and accepted by a number of influential colleagues within my department and outside the university, charges of which I was eventually and completely cleared (except in the minds of some both here and beyond). Without that bump in the road, which caused more pain and suffering than any reviewer should ever be able to inflict, I would not have taken that fateful detour to the essay, become an essayist,



or followed Emerson in *essay*ing to be. I am still trying to understand, and to forgive, let alone forget—I still choose, however, not to write the name of the reviewer, a choice echoed by my editors here. As Alexander Pope said in *An Essay on Criticism*, the goal, the requirement, and the foundation of literary commentary is “*Gen’rous Converse*.” Perhaps my story will assist authors and reviewers alike in avoiding unfortunate, unnecessary pain and untold and perhaps untellable suffering.

Note on sources and citations: Risking the reader’s inconvenience, I have often read, cited, and quoted from first editions, particularly Hilaire Belloc’s *Hills and the Sea* (which includes “The Mowing of a Field”), E.B. White’s essay on Will Strunk and his essay first published in book form as *This Is New York*, and T.S. Eliot’s *Of Lancelot Andrewes*, *Ash-Wednesday*, *Essays Ancient and Modern*, and *Four Quartets*. I believe in the importance of the book as material object and contend that reading Eliot, say, “in the original,” bears riches and satisfaction unavailable to her or him who reads in “textbooks” or other modern mass-produced versions. I thus embody my belief that reading Belloc’s magnificent essay in the 1908 Methuen edition, with its early, undistinguished jacket, instances making the familiar strange enough to be recognized and appreciated.

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## The Observing Self, or Writing Upon Something: The Character, Art, and Distinctiveness of the Familiar Essay

Some twenty-five years into “the return of/to the essay,” its resurrection and renaissance after a supposed near-death experience around the middle of the past century, Cristina Nehring has put into words what a number of readers now feel: “What’s wrong with the American essay?” Writing on *truthdig*, an electronic “progressive journal of news and opinion,” in late 2007, Nehring declares that “the essay is in a bad way.”<sup>1</sup> It is not, she claims, “because essayists have gotten stupider. It’s not because they’ve gotten sloppier. And it is certainly not because they’ve become less anthologized.” Nor is it, she asserts, because “we, as readers...[have become] lazier, less interested, less educated.” Her comments were occasioned by the twentieth installment of the successful and influential series *Best American Essays*, founded by Robert Atwan, who continues to serve as series editor. Those volumes, according to Nehring, languish in the basement of the local library, “where they’ll sit—with zero date stamps—until released gratis one fine Sunday morning to a used bookstore that, in turn, will sell them for a buck to a college student who’ll place them next to his dorm bed and dump them in an end-of-semester clean-out. That is the fate of the essay today.”

The case made by this writer—not really a supported argument—appears overblown, melodramatic, and driven by both the claim to know and the all-too-familiar rhetoric of crisis. Nehring finally qualifies her position precisely at the moment that she claims to have located the real reason behind a crisis that may, in fact, not be real: “If,” she writes, “the genre is neglected in our day it is first and foremost

because its authors have lost their nerve. It is because essayists—and their editors, their anthologists and the taste-makers on whom they depend—have lost the courage to address large subjects in a large way” (*italics added*). The valuable *aperçu* gets lost in a welter of error and misunderstanding.

Contrary to the claim being asserted, the essay is not being neglected; in fact, various evidence exists of its burgeoning, including appearance in periodicals and as books and place in college and university curricula, belated recognition as deserving of a slot alongside poetry, fiction, and drama. Despite the rather blithe assumption, the essay is not a genre, however, but, as I have argued elsewhere, a site: “*almost* literature” and “*almost* philosophy” (Eduardo Nicol).<sup>2</sup> As to the more reasonable assertion that essayists “have lost the courage to address large subjects in a large way,” a couple of things need be said by way of clarification and qualification. First, as form, the essay is, and has historically been, a modest thing, an indirect thing, proceeding in, through, and by means of the small to the large. It often does not avoid large subjects but in fact takes them on in its characteristically modest manner and undogmatic tone, familiarity with which might have served Cristina Nehring well. Think of G.K. Chesterton’s “A Piece of Chalk,” Hilaire Belloc’s “The Mowing of a Field,” and in particular, Richard Selzer’s “A Worm from My Notebook,” in which, incidentally, he avers that he “coax[es his] students to eschew all great and noble concepts . . . [including] any of the matters that affect society as a whole. There are no ‘great’ subjects for the creative writer; there are only the singular details of a single human life. . . . Always, it is the affliction of one human being that captures the imagination.”<sup>3</sup> The point is that you start with—but only start with, not stop with—the small, the particular, the concrete, and the familiar and proceed in, through, and by means of it to the large, the general, even the universal. Georg Lukács made essentially the same point in 1910 in describing “irony” as the essay’s fundamental characteristic (this in a modestly designated “letter” to a “friend”).<sup>4</sup>

\* \* \*

The very recent publication of a collection edited by the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb attests to the ever-present need to recall the essay’s capacity for large subjects: *The Spirit of the Age: Victorian Essays*. This anthologist observes that “the Victorians did not invent the essay form,” but, she claims, “they did master and perfect it.” She

cites Leslie Stephen to this effect—he was writing in 1881: “‘The present day is not merely favourable to essay-writing but a very paradise for essayists.’”<sup>5</sup> A frequent contributor to the *London Review of Books* as well as the *New York Review of Books*, Andrew O’Hagan writes recently and similarly in *The Atlantic Ocean: Essays on Britain and America* that “[t]he essay and the long reported piece are forms with the most daunting exemplars in the traditions of both Britain and America, and I argue for the forms, not for myself, when I say we must fight at all costs to uphold their status.”<sup>6</sup> So our own time may be at least equally receptive to essay writing as the epochal nineteenth century, even if that essay be a rather different kind, and this is where Cristina Nehring’s diatribe becomes valuable, albeit indirectly, even inadvertently.

The essay that has again become popular, in America especially, is the *personal* essay. The kind that Himmelfarb and O’Hagan extol, and that Nehring wishes to see, is the *familiar* essay. The terms “personal” and “familiar,” which often morph into “informal” and “formal,” add more mud to waters never clear to begin with. Commentators thus flounder when trying to distinguish. Take, as a notable example, Phillip Lopate struggling in his popular recent anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay*—there is, so far as I know, no comparable collection devoted to the *familiar* essay: “The personal essay is a subset of the informal essay,” begins Lopate, himself an essayist.<sup>7</sup> He then brings in the well-known *A Handbook of Literature*, prepared by Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman (revised by Harmon). The strategy is well known. The *Handbook*, which I practically memorized as a grad student at Virginia in the 1960s, defines the “personal” as “‘a kind of informal essay, with an intimate style, some autobiographical content or interest, and an urbane conversational manner.’” Lopate admits that this is confusing, a problem deepened and widened when Hibbard and Holman proceed to define the familiar essay as another subset of the informal, which, writes Lopate, “sounds rather like the personal essay.” Indeed, we read in the *Handbook*, the familiar is “‘The more personal, intimate type of informal essay. It deals lightly, often humorously, with personal experiences, opinions, and prejudices, stressing especially the unusual or novel in attitude and having to do with the varied aspects of everyday life.’” All this prompts Lopate to resignation and defeat, if not despair—the picture is not pretty:

I have never seen a strong distinction drawn in print between the personal essay and the familiar essay; maybe they are identical twins,

maybe close cousins. The difference, *if there is any*, is one of nuance, *I suspect*. The familiar essay values lightness of touch above all else; the personal essay, which need not be light, tends to put the writer's "I" or idiosyncratic angle more at center stage.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, a fine line separates the familiar and the personal essay, but can we not do somewhat better than Lopate manages?

\* \* \*

To begin with, Lopate's distinction, such as it is, represents a throwback to notions of the essay and of the essayist still with us. Graham Good has effectively caricatured them in *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*. He links essaying with the notion of *belles lettres*, which he describes as "an archaism whose use now is entirely dismissive, like the neologism based on it: 'belletristic.'" This, he says,

conjures up the image of a middle-aged man in a worn tweed jacket in an armchair smoking a pipe by a fire in his private library in a country house somewhere in southern England, in about 1910, maundering on about the delights of idleness, country walks, tobacco, old wine, and old books, blissfully unaware that he and his entire culture are about to be swept away by the Great War and modern art.<sup>9</sup>

For all its virtues—not least the close readings of eight major essayists, from Montaigne to Orwell—Good's densely written monograph does not avoid the extreme statement or depiction. The picture above of the Edwardian essayist, with which Good opens, is an exaggeration. It may recall Hilaire Belloc, author of such collections as *On Something, On Nothing and Kindred Subjects* (the first essay in which is "On the Pleasure of Taking Up One's Pen Again," a panegyric on his Waterman 1905 Ideal fountain pen), and, simply, *On*. The caricature is unfortunate and misleading, for Belloc at least (a close friend of the *engagé* G.K. Chesterton) offers biting and still-relevant cultural critiques, including of modern consumerism and materialism, which often striate his familiar compositions, for instance the popular essay "The Mowing of a Field." Good misses the same essential point about essaying as Cristina Nehring: you start from the small, ordinary, and familiar and proceed in, through, and by means of it toward what Lukács calls "the Ultimate." To ignore or bypass the mundane and ordinary leaves you with only the half-truth of immanence, deprived of the possibility and prospect of transcendence. The essay's way may

be wandering and rambling, but it is also, and perhaps more importantly, indirect.

Good, it appears, would take the essayist at her word when, in his characteristically self-deprecating mood, he claims to be writing “upon nothing.” The essayist—the familiar essayist, in particular—writes *upon something*. That writers in the form from Montaigne to Bacon, Cornwallis, Cowley, Dryden, John Norris of Bemerton, and Lady Mary Chudleigh employ the tiny preposition “on” or “of” in their titles points to the presence and the importance of subject matter. Because he fails to distinguish between the familiar and the personal essay, Graham Good misses the difference between “the self observed” and “the observing self.”

Not all personal essays are familiar, although all familiar essays are personal. The reason why is not, *pace* Lopate, the “writer’s ‘I’ or idiosyncratic angle.”<sup>10</sup> Personal essays become other than familiar when the scales tip, and the focus becomes “the self observed,” when the writing is primarily about the self of the writer rather than “on” or “of” something outside the self. The familiar essayist—one of the best of whom is the aforementioned Hilaire Belloc—writes “On Nothing,” “Of Books” and “Of Practice” (Montaigne), “Of Studies” (Bacon), *Of Dramatick Poesie: An Essay* (Dryden), “On Solitude” (Norris of Bemerton), “On Not Liking Sex” (Nancy Mairs), and the like. Although Lopate includes E.B. White among the personal essayists generously represented in his popular and influential anthology, it is better because it is less confusing—as well as accurate—to regard White as a familiar essayist.

With regard to White as a person off the page, his readers learn hardly more than they do about his mentor, that “hair-shirt of a man” as he calls him, the Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, author of *Walden* and other renowned and now-canonical essays. Leading off his magisterial account of time spent largely alone at Walden Pond, outside Concord, Massachusetts, in the mid-nineteenth century, Thoreau writes, perhaps echoing the essay’s progenitor, Michel de Montaigne:

In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience.<sup>11</sup>

An inadvertent acknowledgment of his Spiderly modernness, this statement looks forward toward White, who continues the tradition, as well as backward toward Montaigne. In Thoreau and White, it is “the first person that is speaking”; in Montaigne, differently, it is the self observing itself, writing about itself. White is well aware of what Lopate calls “the stench of ego”<sup>12</sup>; he writes in 1977 in the intriguing foreword to his *Essays*:

I think some people find the essay the last resort of the egoist, a much too self-conscious and self-serving form for their taste; they feel that it is presumptuous of a writer to assume that his little excursions or his small observations will interest the reader. There is some justice in their complaint. I have always been aware that I am by nature self-absorbed and egoistical; to write of myself to the extent I have done indicates a too great attention to my own life, not enough to the lives of others.<sup>13</sup>

You cannot but, I believe, detect the saccharine smell of irony in White’s economical words. The complexity of his response to the (self-inflicted) charge of egoism and self-absorption appears in the way he moves, without breaking stride or a sweat, to an admission of creativity in the representation he offers of that self; the passage smacks of the acknowledgment, not so much of self-fashioning, as of a reluctance to reveal very much in a strict autobiographical sense.

White acknowledges wearing many “shirts,” even to putting on “the mantle of Michel de Montaigne,” which hangs ready in his closet. He has already used the image of the essayist’s dress or attire, earlier in the brief foreword, even more directly suggesting that the essayist adopts, and adapts, a varying—*divers et ondoyant* (Montaigne)—persona as needed or desired: “The essayist arises in the morning and, if he has work to do, selects his garb from an unusually extensive wardrobe: he can pull on any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, the “I” of the familiar essay, such as E.B. White crafted near to perfection, is personal in the sense of being distinctive (whether or not “idiosyncratic”), highly individual, and peculiar (i.e., particular). The so-called voice we hear, crucial to any essay’s effectiveness and success, is the autobiographical essayist’s—he pulls on one of the many shirts he has awaiting him in his closet, but that “voice” remains, ineluctably, an accoutrement, selected for



the occasion. It tells (you something) about the essayist, but only indirectly.

\* \* \*

To illustrate the difference between the voice of the familiar essayist and that of the personal, take Montaigne's "Of Practice" and White's "Death of a Pig," both of them well known to amateurs of the form. The voices have much in common, it is true; their obvious qualities include being candid (the "first ingredient," White thought), respectful, sensitive, observant, thoughtful, engaged and engaging, affable and personable, inviting, generous of spirit, knowledgeable but not pedantic, self-deprecating, restrained (including of expectation), experienced—wise. Montaigne is directly autobiographical, recounting the near-death experience that was a fall from his horse and proceeding to an apologia for his new kind of writing, the *essais*. His topic is familiar: the matter of practice, that is, the preparation for death, thence the practice of this particular, new-fangled kind of writing down the page. White treats death, too, that of a pig that, obviously and grievously sick, becomes more to him than the prospect of ham or bacon, becomes, in fact, nothing less than a presentiment of his own lack of difference from pig and a symbol of his own impending, definite doom—he too will die. But the "I" whose voice we hear on the page of White's wonderful essay is clearly quite different from that we (blithely) call Montaigne's. Montaigne's feels unscripted, as it were, whereas White's feels crafted. Perhaps it is the difference between nature and culture, or else, the demands and exigencies of strict fidelity to the self and that to the work under construction. For White's voice appears directed, shaped, and *made*, which conclusion I submit as neither criticism nor praise but simply as description.

Although the personal essay differs substantially from the memoir, having, for instance, a greater interest in and concern for a topic being engaged and/or illustrated, the story that it tells tends to exist for the sake of revealing something about the life being represented. In a familiar essay, much less likely as it is to be confused with a memoir, the story is larger than the life engaged, and the life glimpsed in a familiar essay exists there largely for the sake of the story being told. The familiar essay shows somewhat of the autobiographical self not for the sake of revealing the self but so as to contribute to an overall artistic and thematic whole. It is a matter of relative emphasis—and