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The Best
AMERICAN
ESSAYS
1990

Edited and with an Introduction
by JUSTIN KAPLAN

ROBERT ATWAN,
Series Editor

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The Best American Essays

1986 Elizabeth Hardwick

1987 Gay Talese

1988 Annie Dillard

1989 Geoffrey Wolff

1990 Justin Kaplan

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Foreword

EACH YEAR *The Best American Essays* confronts its guest editor with two critical challenges. One, of course, is to decide the twenty or so outstanding essays that will make up the annual edition. The other challenge — equally difficult but far less visible to readers — is to decide which of the numerous candidates for the volume are truly essays. Many prose pieces that look like essays are really reviews, reports, features, commentary, interviews, or profiles — in a word, what newspapers and magazines routinely call articles.

If it's impossible to come up with an airtight definition of an essay, it's equally impossible to define an article. This all-purpose literary label has a long, complex history, one that would make an interesting article in itself. The word goes back to the Latin term for a joint (*artus*) connecting two parts of a body, and its literal use was gradually extended to include the component parts of writing and discourse. By the early eighteenth century, "article" was being used regularly for literary compositions that treated a specific topic. According to the *OED*, the essayist Joseph Addison was the first to use the word in its modern journalistic sense.

Articles require not just a topic, but a topical topic. Unlike essays, articles are usually (a) about something specific, and (b) about something of current interest. Essays, on the other hand, can take large liberties with subject, theme, sources of information, organization, and point of view. Essayists tend to be personal, reflective, leisurely, digressive; article writers — should we

revive the old term and call them “articlers”? — usually stay close to the facts, rarely stray from “the point,” and seldom interrupt the flow of information with personal opinion. The essayist, too, will feel comfortable writing about various general topics — friendship, envy, nature, manners. The articler — whether the piece is inspired or required — is usually looking for an angle or “hook” to tie it up with some current event or fashionable trend.

Assign the topic of revenge to two writers, an essayist and an articler. Chances are the essayist will take a first-person, reflective look at the nature of revenge, blending together literary allusions and personal experience; the articler will most likely shape several interviews with psychologists into an informative piece assuring readers that revenge is a perfectly normal feeling and offering them six ways to cope with it. These are extremes, to be sure, but they suggest the divergent routes of the essay and article in today’s literary marketplace. Or try this test: pick up a magazine and flip open to a page of text. Skim the page; do you detect a large proportion of interview quotations, a high percentage of names in the news, do you see catchy subheads, teasers, bulleted lists, statistics, abbreviations, and acronyms? If so, then it’s about 99 percent certain you have an article in your hands.

But, as Justin Kaplan reminds us, writing is a slippery commodity and can easily elude the most carefully constructed editorial categories. At either end of the spectrum, it’s fairly simple to distinguish an essay from an article. As we move toward the center, however, the distinctions grow less clear. Here we begin to find a compositional mix: personal essays that depend on research and reporting; topical articles that display a personal voice and viewpoint. These literary hybrids are becoming increasingly prevalent in the general magazines.

A large part of the distinction between an essay and an article rests on the writing’s apparent durability. Many timely magazine articles, no matter how immediately engaging or skillfully crafted, have a painfully brief rack life. As public interest in a trend or topic fades, so does interest in the article. The names are no longer in the news, the issues irrelevant, the acronyms meaningless, the statistics hopelessly dated. How many fine articles by good writers hold up for five years? How many stay fresh even

after one year? How to treat the immediate moment — to deal concretely and intelligently with the issues and topics of one's time — and still be read with pleasure long after that moment? That is an essential question for anyone who hopes to write enduring nonfiction.

It's a question Justin Kaplan carefully considered as he shaped this year's edition around public, rather than personal, essays. Though several personal and familiar essays appear in the book, the focus here is on writers working within the arena of topics and issues: a national disaster, the environment, AIDS, the First Amendment, the Academy Awards, the origins of baseball, Elvis sightings, Andy Warhol's legacy, the tensions between Blacks and Jews, the American novel. In all of these selections, the writers move between the topical requirements of an article and the literary demands of an essay, adroitly balancing fact and observation with the nuances of voice and style, irony and wit.

The Best American Essays features a selection of the year's outstanding essays, essays of literary achievement that show an awareness of craft and a forcefulness of thought. Roughly 300 essays are gathered from a wide variety of regional and national publications. These essays are then screened and turned over to a distinguished guest editor, who may add a few personal favorites to the list and who makes the final selections.

To qualify for selection, the essays must be works of respectable literary quality intended as fully developed, independent essays (not excerpts or reviews) on subjects of general interest (not specialized scholarship), originally written in English (or translated by the author) for first appearance in an American periodical during the calendar year. Publications that want to make sure their contributions will be considered each year should include the series on their subscription list (Robert Atwan, *The Best American Essays*, P.O. Box 1074, Maplewood, New Jersey 07040).

For this volume, I'd like to thank Charles Christensen for the many excellent suggestions he has provided the series since its inception. I'm grateful to Jane Jubilee once again for her timely help in putting the manuscript together. As guest editor, Justin Kaplan proceeded in the spirit of the great essayists. His open-

ness to divergent opinions, sense of humor, resistance to cant and pomposity, and his commitment to public discourse are qualities that — however we define the genre — will always remain at the heart of the essay.

R.A.

Introduction

THIS DELICIOUS editorial assignment — to read, more or less at leisure, essays published during the past year in American magazines and select twenty or so from among them — nevertheless awakened some old apprehensions in me. They have to do with the aura and essence of the word “essay” and with recollections of Sunday afternoons darkened by the knowledge that I had one due at school the next day. Even now, on certain Sunday afternoons, especially during the winter, I feel in a shadowy way some of the same dread along with a pounding pulse and elevated skin temperature. The root of this early misery was not the work of writing but the indeterminacy of what was expected: an essay, but an essay about *what*? Why didn’t they give us a subject? That would have been a humane thing to do. Instead, the word “essay,” like Keats’s word “forlorn,” became a tolling bell.

What made those school assignments even more daunting was some of the models our teachers held up to us: Francis Bacon, Addison and Steele, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Robert Louis Stevenson, Logan Pearsall Smith. Once in a while these highly respected authors did in fact get their essays going with something definite — a prizefight for Hazlitt, a pig roast for Lamb. But even then their work had a certain hermetic, self-referential quality, and their covert subject, no matter what their titles said, was the act of writing itself. These essays were ultimately triumphs of pure writing, of style, even, as C. S. Lewis said about Bacon, of “stylistic illusion.” We all thought we understood Bacon’s celebrated opening sentence, “What is truth? said jesting Pilate, and

would not stay for an answer." But I wondered then whether Bacon himself could have told me what he was driving at in the next sentence: "Certainly there be that delight in giddiness, and count it a bondage to fix a belief; affecting free-will in thinking, as well as in acting." Was this the same Francis Bacon so dedicated to clear empiricism that he was to catch his death of cold in an experiment with preserving dead chickens in the snow?

At a time long before the New Journalism invited the writer to take center stage, the whole business of writing essays without a set topic seemed one of the "paradoxes of creativity" Jacques Barzun discusses here: "Producing something where nothing was before — making a thing out of nothing," even though science and common sense tell us that "nothing can be made from nothing." I don't know how in my greenness and nothing-ness I should have been expected to generate a thousand words that wouldn't give me a seizure to reread, and yet it had to be done, and it *was* done. On my first day as a college freshman I learned that I had already demonstrated enough competence to be excused from all required composition courses. At that moment the tolling bell stopped tolling, and pleasure ever since has prevailed over all my other feelings about the essay.

The old, nagging question remains unanswered, however. What is an essay, and what, if anything, is it *about*? "Formal" and "informal," "personal," "familiar," "review-essay," "article-essay," "critical essay," essays literary, biographical, polemic, and historical — the standard lit-crit lexicon and similar attempts at genre definition and subclassification in the end simply tell you how like an eel this essay creature is. It wriggles between narcissism and detachment, opinion and fact, the private party and the public meeting, omphalos and brain, analysis and polemics, confession and reportage, persuasion and provocation. All you can safely say is that it's not poetry and it's not fiction.

Given the confusion of genre minglings and overlaps, what finally distinguishes an essay from an article may just be the author's gumption, the extent to which personal voice, vision, and style are the prime movers and shapers, even though the authorial "I" may be only a remote energy, nowhere visible but everywhere present. ("We commonly do not remember," Thoreau wrote in the opening paragraphs of *Walden*, "that it is, after

all, always the first person that is speaking.") Taking a cue from Annie Dillard's piece here, I suggest that the personal, familiar, informal essay — Joseph Epstein's "A Few Kind Words for Envy," for example — is a kind of stunt flying, a public display of energy and spirit, a sequence of loops, rolls, arabesques, and linked improvisations that never loses its line. (Stephen Jay Gould's collocation of baseball, creation myth, and evolutionary theory is also stunt flying.) The journalist or article writer, on the other hand, travels an assigned, scheduled course from one place to another, is answerable to editorial ground controllers, and has to deliver the people and goods on the manifest. Most of the essays in this collection fall between stunt flying and scheduled air traffic. They tend to be "about" something that exists independently of their authors' feelings and experiences, and this exercise of personal editorial taste, I have to acknowledge, may be my form of restitution for Sunday afternoons.

"Although the Essay seems to be undergoing the mildest of revivals just now," Wilfred Sheed recently said, "and occasional books have the nerve to call themselves collections of essays, the form has been in virtual eclipse for most of my writing life, squeezed to a shadow by the adjoining landmasses of the Article and the Review, not to mention its own dwarf love child, the column. One would feel unbearably precious calling oneself an essayist these days, but anyway they won't let you." Despite the evasive title, and his suggestion that the essay is in danger of extinction, Sheed's *Essays in Disguise* (1990) is one of those admirably nervy collections; others are Gore Vidal's *At Home*, reissued this year in paperback, and the late John Clive's book of historical essays in the grand discursive manner of Gibbon and Macaulay, *Not by Fact Alone*. Although no one could claim that with these exceptions, as well as the work of Lewis Thomas and a few others, essay collections as a publishing commodity enjoy the boom of short story collections, the essay itself, as I think the pieces below demonstrate, is far from being in "virtual eclipse."

A remarkably large number of this year's essays are about illness and medical emergencies. I've included four: Anatole Broyard's "Intoxicated by My Illness," Natalie Kusz's "Vital Signs," Randy Shilts's "Talking AIDS to Death," and Paul West's "Por-

trait of the Artist as a Lion on Stilts." (A fifth, William Styron's piece about depression, "Darkness Visible," is listed among this year's "Notable Essays.") That we see so many distinctive pieces — sardonic, unflinching, even celebratory in a somber and grateful way — on this one topic may well be the flip side of our national obsession with fitness, diet, and conditioning; perhaps, AIDS aside, modern medicine gives us more survivors to contemplate the dynamics of survival; the AIDS tragedy in itself has forced us into a broader confrontation with what used to be denied or disguised. (Even *New York Times* obituaries, traditionally exercises in elision and circumlocution, now tell you what people died of — cancer, for example, is cancer and not a "long illness" — and who their significant companions were.) These essays are also an implicit attack on the kind of murk-making "insincerity" George Orwell identified in his essay "Politics and the English Language" (1946). Along with cliché, "euphemism, question-begging, and sheer, cloudy vagueness," he wrote, fall "upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details" and giving "an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

Other essays in this collection deal in different ways with the sort of cant Orwell had in his sights. "People say, 'I'm having trouble with my relationship,'" Leonard Michaels writes, "as though the trouble were not with Penelope or Max but with an object, like a BMW, a sort of container or psychological condition into which they enter and relate." He is just as hard on "mothering," "parenting," and the all-purpose banality "I can relate to that." "Environment," Joy Williams writes ("Save the Whales, Screw the Shrimp")—"Such a bloodless word. A flat-footed word with a shrunken heart. A word increasingly disengaged from its association with the natural world." She argues that "the ecological crisis cannot be resolved by politics. It cannot be solved by science or technology. It is a crisis caused by culture and character, and a deep change in personal consciousness is needed." The problem is how to rescue the environmental issue from degenerating into another fashionable cause taken up by politicians, image manipulators, and corporate advertisers gearing up to worship what Gore Vidal calls "the new world god, Green" with "environmentally friendly" products and proclamations that "every day is Earth Day with nuclear energy."

Alan Dershowitz's "Shouting 'Fire!'" examines Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's frequently quoted, fundamentally mischievous example of unprotected speech under the First Amendment — perhaps "the only jurisprudential analogy that has assumed the status of a folk argument." Barzun targets "creativity," along with "innovation" one of contemporary culture's favorite buzz words. As a biographer who has done more than his share of penitential reading in the psychological literature about "creativity" and "the creative personality," and discovered that little in it holds up under intelligent scrutiny, I applaud Barzun for saying, "It is characteristic of a technological age to imagine that creation is a series of steps that can be discovered and analyzed like digestion or photosynthesis."

Ann Hodgman's hilarious report on her ordeal in Alpo-land, Stanley Elkin's "At the Academy Awards," and Michael Pollan's "Why Mow? The Case Against Lawns" are first-rate examples of topical humor and satire. But 1989 turns out not to have been a good year for political humor in the essay (as distinguished from the column), despite the fact that the fields received a good manuring from the bafflements of Dan Quayle, S & L scandals, insider memoirs, astrology, and the transition from one president who couldn't remember anything he did to another who in fifteen months hasn't done anything anyone else remembers (aside from invading Panama and denouncing broccoli). American satirists and humorists, from Mark Twain to Lenny Bruce and after, practice a profession that, in several senses, is a punishing one. They occupy a queer position in this country — that of clowns and entertainers when they don't inflict pain, cranks and socio-paths when they do.

Cynthia Ozick's "T. S. Eliot at 101," published in *The New Yorker*, was not only a literary essay, in every sense of the term, but also a personal one, its subtext (as I understand it) being the story of Ms. Ozick (as Sinbad the Sailor) dislodging the Old Man of the Sea (Eliot) from her shoulders. For reasons of length and permissions alone, her piece had to be left out of this collection. Another omission I regret is that of Julian Barnes's "Shipwreck" (*The New Yorker*), despite appearances to the contrary an excerpt from a novel, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*.

Tom Wolfe's "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," the last se-

lection here, was surely one of the noisier literary events of 1989. An advertisement for himself (and for *The Bonfire of the Vanities*) transparently disguised as a "manifesto for the new social novel," Wolfe's piece is frankly outrageous although, as always with this writer, stylistically supercharged and distinctive. It is a joy to read, however violently one takes issue with it. Many writers did. In the Letters column of *Harper's* three months after Wolfe's appearance in the magazine, Mary Gordon scored his "ignorance" and "narcissism," claimed that his "theory of realism would make a college freshman blush," and concluded that he was "the thinking man's redneck." For John Hawkes, Wolfe's stand on post-World War II fiction was "essentially reactionary and anti-intellectual," a familiar form of "literary America firstism." Alison Lurie pointed out that of the forty-eight writers mentioned in his article only two were women, a proportion suggesting that for Wolfe "literature is an almost exclusively masculine field." Wolfe's "billion-footed beast" struck Jim Harrison as "an origami pussycat . . . the Babbittry of Art in a new, white suit." In a more calmly argued response (in *The New York Times Book Review*) Robert Tower called the entire manifesto an "exercise in philistinism." And so on. If Wolfe had set out only to perform a provocative test, as doctors call it, on the thinking of American fiction writers today, he could scarcely have done a better job.

At the beginning of 1989, a year of extraordinary, even (until then) unimaginable changes and events, Robert Heilbroner declared in *The New Yorker* that "the contest between capitalism and socialism is over: capitalism has won." During the summer Francis Fukuyama stirred up a dust storm in *The National Interest* with "The End of History?" — the question mark at the end of his title being a sort of wild card. Had ideology finally died, or was the coming new order merely the triumph of K Mart over G.U.M.? Was "the end of history," as one respondent asked, "the political equivalent of global warming"? Fukuyama's critics thought that his account of the slaying of ideology at the hands of "economic and political liberalism" had got its paws tangled in a leash of semantic ambiguity ("history," "liberalism") and Hegelian dialectic. The new year opened with the publication (in the winter issue of *Daedalus*) of a companion piece to Fukuyama's in soggi-ness and pontification, "To the Stalin Mausoleum." This one de-

rived a considerable portion of its front-page news value from the fact that the author was identified only as a mysterious “Z” (which, in turn, recalled an important 1947 essay by “X” — George Kennan — credited with enunciating “containment” as American cold war policy). Fukuyama and “Z” may have been only “intellectual flavors of the month,” as Mark Feeney of the *Boston Globe* observed, but in their brief transit through the public mind they stimulated a certain amount of thinking, and this is no small achievement.

As it turned out, however, the signal events of 1989 — Tiananmen Square, the Wall, the stirrings of German reunification, the far-reaching effects of *perestroika*, the shrinking of Soviet hegemony, the promise of a “peace dividend” — simply moved too fast, too overwhelmingly, for the essay. But events of this size and velocity may not be the territory of the essay to begin with but that of reportage, articles, think pieces, and “thumb suckers.” These are all of a day and serve a purpose. But essays on grand issues private as well as public require time, distance, distillation, and percolation through a subsoil of style and sensibility. What they may lack in todayness they make up in staying power.

JUSTIN KAPLAN