

The **A**rt of
the

ESSAY



LYDIA FAKUNDINY

The Art of the Essay



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Acknowledgments continue on p. 745

The Art of the Essay



For my parents, Elisabeth and Albert Fakunding



Preface

This book on the essay's art evolved through the improvisations of the classroom. In spirit, and in many of its actual parts, it has been rehearsed again and again. The essays collected and the apparatus that accompanies them are, so to speak, the cumulative script of those rehearsals, a tribute to what the essay can do by showing what it has done during the course of its literary life in a single, widely distributed modern language: English. My aim has not been to trace the essay's development or to anatomize it by kinds, though this chronologically arranged, richly diversified selection lends itself to such studies and others. Rather, I have sought to choose from the wealth of some four centuries essays so accomplished in themselves yet so various in form, style, tone, aim, length, scope, subject, and effect, that their sum would illustrate as broad a rhetorical range, as large a generic terrain, as I could identify. There are no excerpts here, no edited chunks of originally longer works; and, although some of these essays began life as talks, none of them is, to my knowledge, a mere transcript of an address to a live audience. Every piece is, in that sense, a *written* text, composed as a short, independent, self-contained prose discourse: an essay. Literary distinction, insofar as I know it when I see it, has been my principal guide. In the tenth issue of his *Covent Garden Journal* (February 4, 1754), Henry Fielding proposed, as a first step in the formation of literary taste, "a total abstinence from all bad books." Without presuming to lay down rules of taste I can say only that, if I have failed in the eyes of some readers to choose only the very best essays for their enjoyment, I feel reasonably sure of having succeeded at promoting abstinence from any very bad ones.

Anthologies are for accommodating under one roof some family or tribe of discourses to be read, enjoyed, and studied together; and they are for whetting appetites, for signposting the vast countries beyond. In my own commentaries—an introduction, seventy-five headnotes, and an appended three-part discussion—I have tried to extend both functions of anthologies: to gather and order on the one hand, to suggest and point elsewhere on the other.

My introductory piece, "On Approaching the Essay," considers, in something of the spirit of the creature itself, the beginnings and the character of this fascinating genre. I try, in other words, to draw as close

as I can manage to what the essay *is*; in the process, a serviceable trail may have been cut here and there for exploring the essays in this book and elsewhere.

The headnotes that precede each selection (or two by the same writer) are offered as brief guides along the way; like many such guides, they probably take on more meaning the farther in one ventures. In keeping with my aim to collect not a group of great *essayists* but a diverse range of distinguished *essays* (some by famous practitioners, some by writers known mainly for work of other kinds), I have not dwelled on biographical details. Instead, I have situated each selection in what I hope is a suggestive context, whether in respect to the essay as genre or, more narrowly, to the writer's personal and artistic concerns. Bibliographic sources are noted parenthetically in the headnotes to point interested readers, critics, and essayists in the right direction.

Following these eighty-seven essays in English, from Bacon to our contemporaries, are three perspectives on the essay under the heading "Resources for Readers and Writers." First, I take up the French inventor of the essay, Michel de Montaigne, without whom any foray into the tradition, in whatever language, seems unthinkable; Donald Frame's fine translation of Montaigne's essay "Of Practice" serves to lead readers and writers to this great and perhaps most influential of all essayists. Montaigne and a goodly number of his successors in English have their say in the second section, "Essayists on Their Art," a loosely linked series of excerpts intended to supplement my own introductory essay. The wealth of ideas and beauties of language to be found in these comments on the essay by accomplished practitioners cannot but enhance any reader's appreciation of the form, any writer's own attempts. The last and longest part, "Talking about Style," seeks to engage readers and writers alike in the verbal artistry of essayistic prose, specifically the prose collected in this book. The scope of my discussion, its use of technical language, its range and degree of detail are, I hope, adequate to the dual task of introducing the fun and value of stylistic analysis to those who have never tried it and of reinforcing and refining the skill of those who have.

I am indebted to all who have variously incited, encouraged, facilitated, and supported the making of this book, especially:

The late Alistair Campbell, Bosworth-Rawlinson Professor of Anglo-Saxon, Oxford University, England, for compelling me to look at Early English sentences;

Scott B. Elledge, Goldwin Smith Professor of English Literature Emeritus, Cornell University, for getting me hooked on modern essayistic prose;

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hours of talk about language, literature, and theory, and for being my most steadfast, my most exacting and responsive reader and critic;

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., John Spencer Bassett Professor of English & Literature, Duke University, for his abiding interest in my course on the essay and for telling me more than once to write my own textbook and get a proposal out, fast;

My editors at Houghton Mifflin Company, women of skill and courage, for paying attention to my proposal, for shepherding it and ensuing manuscripts through their institutional phases with professional good sense, and, not least of all, for devising a production schedule that made reasonable and possible what might otherwise have been out of the question;

The following reviewers of my proposal to write this book and of its table of contents, for the generous gift of their time and for their discerning responses: Sylvan Barnet of Tufts University (retired), Neil Daniel of Texas Christian University, Miriam Dow of The George Washington University, David Espey of the University of Pennsylvania, Doug Hunt of the University of Missouri, Roger D. Lund of LeMoyne College, Michael Meyer of the University of Connecticut, Scott Russell Sanders of Indiana University, Patricia L. Skarda of Smith College, Robert Wiltenberg of Washington University;

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The staff of the Department of Rare Books, Cornell University, for generous access to Benjamin Franklin's handwritten draft, dated September 20, 1778, of "The Ephemera," and for permitting me to edit the manuscript for inclusion in this book;

Phillis Molock, who keeps typing up the much-edited pages I hand her into faultless manuscripts and does so with friendly good humor, however pressed she may be, and with wit and time to spare;

My colleagues, Ann Boehm, Stuart Davis, and Kenneth McClane, for our ongoing conversations about teaching writing of all kinds from "creative" and "critical" to "composition";

And to some two hundred veterans of a decade of English 388/89, "The Art of the Essay," who could always be counted on to put in my way questions, problems, and essays I needed to think up this book.

To all of these and, of course, to the essay, I give thanks.

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On Approaching the Essay



