

The Best
AMERICAN
ESSAYS
1986

Edited and with an Introduction
by ELIZABETH HARDWICK

ROBERT ATWAN,
Series Editor



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Foreword

THIS IS THE INAUGURAL VOLUME of *The Best American Essays*. Such a collection has been long overdue. E. B. White — whose death last year deprived the American essay of one of its most respected practitioners — once observed that essayists don't receive the same literary attention as novelists, poets, and dramatists. The essayist, said White, "must be content in his self-imposed role of second-class citizen." Ten years ago, Edward Hoagland, another excellent essayist, also commented on the odd status of the essay: "It's strange that though two fine anthologies remain that publish the year's best stories, no comparable collection exists of essays." That collection finally exists.

This new series calls attention to the essay as a vital and remarkably versatile literary form. The modern American essay has adapted to a reading public's imperious demand for information, while retaining the personal, fluid, and speculative manner that has long characterized the form. Consider how many physicians and medical researchers have recently discovered the essay — not the technical article but the genuine literary form — as an especially effective way of bridging science and literature, of uniting what Stephen Jay Gould calls "nasty little facts" with humanistic values. Perhaps this should come as no surprise, since the essay began in aphorism, and the aphorism — Hippocrates was the first to use the word — grew out of medical science: "Life is short," he admonished, "the Art long, opportunity fleeting, experiment treacherous, judgment difficult."

Hippocrates was speaking of the art of medicine; but he might as well have been describing the art of the essay. Certainly those writers for whom the essay is not the occasional piece of prose, but rather what Annie Dillard calls the "real work," know that the essay — like fiction, poetry, and drama — has its own special challenges, its own opportunities for individual craft and style. Essayists are not people inspired to write nonfiction — whatever that nonword means — but to write essays.

But what are essays? One of my favorite definitions comes from a well-known student's *Handbook to Literature*. An essay, it starts confidently, is "a moderately brief prose discussion of a restricted topic." But by the next sentence that encyclopedic self-assurance has completely vanished, and we are informed that "no satisfactory definition can be arrived at." Even Montaigne, who named the genre four hundred years ago, stopped short of defining it. He saw the strange, eccentric stuff he wrote mainly in terms of literary production, as an active verb — he attempts, he tests, he tries, he *essays* — and not in terms of literary consumption — the finished composition. The writing spirit, not the reading matter. Montaigne may have been the first writer to invite the reader to catch him in the act: *Watch me thinking. Watch me writing.*

Thought and expression, substance and style: the essayist shuttles between these fuzzy boundaries, now settling down with ideas and exposition, now searching for eloquence and charm. Drift too far in one direction and you get an article — informative, impersonal, subject-bound; but move too far to the other side and you get a literary pose — arch, impressionistic, over-written. Robert Louis Stevenson was one of those brilliant young essayists always willing to sacrifice substance to style. David Daiches found a way to pin down that tendency: "Stevenson wanted to be a writer before he had anything to say." But no one has expressed the modern essay's need to balance craft and concept better than Virginia Woolf: "The art of writing has for backbone some fierce attachment to an idea."

So many things go under the name of essay — celebrity profiles, interviews, political commentary, reviews, reportage, scientific papers, scholarly articles, snippets of humor, and those

thin 750-word rectangles appropriately called "columns." Much of this day-to-day prose — though often informative and entertaining — loses its appeal as soon as whatever occasioned it loses its power to command attention. Flip through the pages of old magazines and you are more likely to read the ads than the articles.

Yet essays appear every year that transcend the daily newspaper and the monthly magazine. For various reasons of craft, or insight, or feeling, these essays leave a permanent impression. They become — as did E. B. White's essays in the forties, James Baldwin's in the fifties, Joan Didion's in the sixties, and Annie Dillard's in the seventies — a vital part of contemporary literature. They deserve to be collected; to be read again and again.

The Best American Essays will feature a selection of the year's outstanding essays, essays of literary achievement that show an awareness of craft and a forcefulness of thought. Roughly a hundred essays will be screened from a wide variety of regional and national publications. (Fine essays have a way of turning up in unexpected places, as the reading public discovered when it learned that Lewis Thomas's prize-winning essays had regularly appeared in *The New England Journal of Medicine*.) These hundred or so essays will be turned over to a distinguished guest editor, who may add a few personal favorites to the list and who will make 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 inaugural volume, I would like to thank my friend Laurance Wieder, who helped me get the project started. Corlies Smith and Katrina Kenison at Ticknor & Fields gave the

plan a warm and instantaneous reception. The many magazine editors I spoke with were generous in their support and unanimous in their belief that this was an idea whose time had come. I think the series is immensely fortunate in having one of America's premier authors, Elizabeth Hardwick, as its first guest editor.

R.A.

Introduction

THE ESSAY? Thousands of pages of prose are published each month and not many of them are given to fiction. Perhaps most of the pages are information about the events of the day or the week and are not to be thought of as essays. What is this thunder and hail of newsprint felling the forests of the world? Journalism? Not quite, not nowadays. The knowing would not restrict the word *journalism* to mere information, if information can be thought of as *mere*. Nowadays journalism is a restless and predatory engagement, having established its imperial mandate under the phrase *new journalism*, established its claim with such occupying force that the phrase itself is no longer needed, no longer defining.

If we cannot be sure we are reading journalism according to the rules of the professional schools, we are even less certain that we are reading the elevated essay. Still, there is something called the essay, and volumes by individual writers are published under the title. Even then the term does not provide a serenity of precision; it is not altogether genuine in its shape, like fiction or poetry. It does not even have the advantage of pointing to scale since some essays are short and many are long and most incline to a condition of unexpressed hyphenation: the critical essay, the autobiographical essay, the travel essay, the political — and so on and so on.

There is a self-congratulatory sense in the word *essay*. It wants to signify that what has been offered is not a lesser offering, not just a review, a sketch, a "piece" — odd, useful word — sum-

moned to feed the hungry space of periodicals. Sometimes the vagrant coinage *essayistic* appears in the press, and this is bad news for the language since it indicates an extension of murky similarity to what is itself more than a little cloudy. Of course, we always know what a barbarism is trying to say; its nature is to indicate the struggle for definition.

To be like an essay, if not quite the real thing, means that, in a practical bit of prose, attention has been paid to expressiveness and that to gain expressiveness certain freedoms have been exercised, freedoms illicit in the minds of some readers, freedoms not so much exercised as seized over the border. Essays are aggressive even if the mind from which they come is fair, humane, and, when it is to the point, disinterested. Hazlitt, in an essay on the poets living in his own time, writes: "Mrs. Hannah More is another celebrated modern poetess, and I believe still living. She has written a great deal which I have never read." It might take Mrs. More, if indeed she lived still, some time to figure out just what was being said.

The aggressiveness of the essay is the assumption of the authority to speak in one's own voice and usually the authority is earned by previous performance. We see a name on the cover or inside the pages and we submit to the reading with some eagerness, which may be friendly eagerness or not. One of the assumptions of the essayist is the right to make his own mistakes, since he speaks only for himself, allowing for the philosopher's cunning observation that "in my opinion" actually asserts "all reasonable men will agree." This claim is sometimes disputed by an elected authority, the editor, who may think too many vil-lages have been overrun by the marauder. Since the freedom of the open spaces is the condition of the essay, too much correction and surgical intervention turns the composition into something else, perhaps an article, that fertile source of profit and sometimes pleasure in the cultural landscape.

William Gass, in what must be called an essay, a brilliant one, about Emerson, an essayist destined from the cradle, makes a distinction between the article and the essay. Having been employed by the university and having heard so many of his colleagues "doing an article on," Gass has come to think of the article as "that awful object" because it is under the command

of defensiveness in footnote, reference, coverage, and would also pretend that all must be useful and certain, even if it is "very likely a veritable Michelin of misdirection." If the article has a certain sheen and professional polish, it is the polish of "the scrubbed step" — practical economy and neatness. The essay, in Gass's view, is a great meadow of style and personal manner, freed from the need for defense except that provided by an individual intelligence and sparkle. We consent to watch a mind at work, without agreement often, but only for pleasure. Knowledge hereby attained, great indeed, is again wanted for the pleasure of itself.

We would not want to think of the essay as the country of old men, but it is doubtful that the slithery form, wearisomely vague and as chancy as trying to catch a fish in the open hand, can be taught. Already existing knowledge is so often required. Having had mothers and fathers and the usual miserable battering of the sense of self by life may arouse the emotional pulsations of a story or a poem; but feeling is not sufficient for the essay. Comparisons roam about it, familiarity with those who have plowed the field before, shrewdness concerning the little corner or big corner that may remain for the intrusion of one's own thoughts. Tact and appropriateness play a part. How often we read a beginner's review that compares a thin thing to a fat one. "John Smith, like Tolstoy, is very interested in the way men interact under the conditions of battle." Well, no.

Fortunately, the essay is not a closed shop, and the pages do vibrate again and again with the appearance of a new name with no credentials admired or despised. An unknown practitioner of the peculiar animation of the prose of an essay takes up the cause. It is an occasion for happiness since it is always astonishing that anyone will write an essay. Some write them not once but more or less regularly. To wake up in the morning under a command to animate the stones of an idea, the clods of research, the uncertainty of memory, is the punishment of the vocation. And all to be done without the aid of end-rhyme and off-rhyme and buried assonance; without an imagined character putting on a hat and going into the street.

Those with the least gift are most anxious to receive a commission. It seems to them that there lies waiting a topic, a new

book, a performance, and that this is known as material. The true prose writer knows there is nothing given, no idea, no text or play seen last evening until an assault has taken place, the forced domination that we call "putting it in your own words." Talking about, thinking about a project bears little relation to the composition; enthusiasm boils down with distressing speed to a paragraph, often one of mischievous banality. To proceed from musing to writing is to feel a robbery has taken place. And certainly there has been a loss; the loss of the smiles and ramblings and discussions so much friendlier to ambition than the cold hardship of writing.

Essays are addressed to a public in which some degree of equity exists between the writer and the reader. Shared knowledge is a necessity, although the information need not be concrete. Perhaps it is more to be thought of as a sharing of the experience of reading certain kinds of texts, texts with omissions and elisions, leaps. The essayist does not stop to identify the common ground; he will not write, "Picasso, the great Spanish painter who lived long in France." On the other hand, essays are about something, something we may not have had reason to study and master, often matters about which we are quite ignorant. Elegance of presentation, reflection made interesting and significant, easily lead us to engage our reading minds with Zulus, herbaceous borders in the English garden, marriage records in eighteenth-century France, Japanese scrolls.

In the contemporary essay, as in contemporary fiction, the use of the first-person narrator or expositor has become so widespread it must be seen as a convenience. This is a puzzle having to do, perhaps, not with self-assertion to fill every available silence, but with modesty, a fear of presumption. In fiction a loss of movement is accepted by the choice of "I" in order to gain relief from knowing and imagining without the possibility of being there to know. That at least may be one of the aesthetic considerations. Also, the dominance of the first-person narrator in current fiction seems to reflect uncertainty about the classical conception of character; often the contemporary psyche is not seen as a lump of traits so much as a mist of inconsistencies, flights, constant improvisations. It is more agreeable to this sense of things to write "It seemed to me" rather than "It was."

In the essay we find the intrusion of the "I" even where little is autobiographical. In my mind I imagine a quite obscure reflection beginning, "I pulled into the filling station with my wife in the front seat and the kids restless and hungry in the back, and there I saw an interesting commercial logo, a sort of unicorn-horse that recalled to me certain medieval illuminated texts." What will follow is as it is, learned, perhaps difficult. How to account for the filling station, except as a fear of presumption about the subject, a search for immediacy, a loosening of the boundaries of prose? Of course it doesn't always work. There are many things worth knowing that cannot be made familiar.

De Quincy in his memoir about the Lake Poets tells of a Mr. Wedgewood, a gifted, loved, quite rich young man, patron of Samuel Coleridge, the tormented genius who very much needed a patron. Mr. Wedgewood sought to distract himself from feelings of depression and lassitude by buying a butcher shop, where the wrangling abuse would force him to a high level of response. The experiment was not happy. There is a certain kind of polemical essay around that is a butcher shop of raw, hacked opinion which arouses a sure relief from torpor by encouraging dissent and violent rebuttal.

Intemperance in political writing has its hacks and its celebrated practitioners. As Trevor-Roper writes in his introduction to a volume of essays by the great Macaulay, "Macaulay could be very unjust to persons. He could also be vindictive. His essay on Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is both. He is unjust to Johnson, unjust to Boswell, and positively vindictive to the editor, Croker, who was not only a Tory but a member of parliament who enraged Macaulay by opposing him in the debates on parliamentary reform." Macaulay was a Whig. It is nearly always useful to be aware of the mind-set of essayists because a determined coloration of belief may spread itself far and wide and land not only on the political field but on the head of the novelist, the film maker, the historian. So it has been; so it is yet. The mastery of expository prose, the rhythm of sentences, the pacing, the sudden flash of unexpected vocabulary, redeem polemic, and, in any case, no one is obliged to agree. But ill-written, pompously self-righteous, lamely jocular forays offend because an air of immature certainty surrounds them. Too great a degree

of exhortation and corrective insistence makes us wish for the tones of the earlier English "familiar essay," with its calm love of nature and tolerance of human frailty.

The selections in the present volume are under the domination of the year 1985, the year just past. That is the way with selections. Many of the outstanding writers in the form are missing, the year not having caught them on the run. To list the lamented absences would be lengthy and then there would be the regret of having, no matter the length, forgotten just the ones wished to be present. And yet 1985 was surely a year like any other for the essay; that is, a year filled with gifts that arrived without expectation. In a sense, every interesting essay is a surprise. The weeks, the months turn over; subscriptions come in the mail, magazine covers in the store arrest the attention and lead us to want to *find out*. Find out what is in the minds of critics of books and art and federal budgets and city scandals. Often we read something unexpected by writers whose work we know. Each month, somewhere, one or another will have written about subjects we had not thought to connect them with. We discover journeys, side-lines of passionate interest, peculiar bits of knowledge, confessions quite new. In this volume a certain range was desirable, a distribution showing the variety of the element and a variety of publications. The book might be three times as long and, in fact, was almost twice as long when the final selection itself turned out to have many more words than practical. In the essay, the "best" is to be thought of as "some of the best." The form exists in so many shapes and sizes and is directed to every point of the compass. The essay is nothing less than the reflection of all there is: art, personal experience, places, literature, portraiture, politics, science, music, education — and just thought itself in orbit. Roland Barthes has written an essay on wrestling, the spectacle of it; Hazlitt composed "The Fight": "Reader, have you ever seen a fight? If not you have pleasure to come, at least if it is a fight between the Gas-man and Bill Neate." Proust wrote an essay "On Reading"; Sartre has written two essays on Faulkner and thousands have been written on Proust and Sartre and again on Faulkner.

There is nearly always a time when the novelist and poet will stand aside to create something other. This will be an imagina-

tive essay and they are among the most beautiful and arresting we know. They tend to be offhand and intuitive, flashing and yet exacting — D. H. Lawrence's, for example. Knowing how to write — there is no substitute for that. The writer may be said to precede the material, and that is why academic writing, where the material is the fundamental capital, is so often like hoeing a hard field in winter. However, being a professor and knowing a great deal about some things does not make one an academic writer. Only the withholding gods can accomplish that.

So there is no end to the essay, and no beginning. Walter Benjamin makes a visit to Moscow: "Each thought, each day, each life lies here as on a laboratory table." The poet, Jules LaForgue, goes to Berlin to be in the service of the Empress: "She has been bored, she is still bored, and she still dreams." Joan Didion has been to Alcatraz Island in California: "Alcatraz Island is covered with flowers now: orange and yellow nasturtiums, geraniums, sweet grass, blue iris, black-eyed Susans. Candytuft springs up through the cracked concrete in the exercise yard."

The essay, at least in reduction, is to be thought of as popular. Think of the number published. In the lightest examples — short sentences, short altogether, with photographs surrounding the shortness — it appears that words here and there about celebrities are gratifying in the gross. This cannot be the search for information, since there is little information in them. Libel is the handmaiden of information about the living. The appeal of celebrity journalism seems to rest upon a promise and to accept the fact that the promise will again and again be unfilled. To know the sanitized items, in almost infinite repetition, about the famous indicates an overwhelming appetite. Born somewhere, lives somewhere, may have a "wonderful" child, possibly a mate to whom, for the time being, everything is owed. Parents somewhere and, nearer, the career itself. "I want to improve my acting." All of this is prose of some kind, a commission arranged and concluded.

The true essay, making as it does a contribution to the cultural life, is not so simple. Its celebrities are likely to be long-dead painters, writers, and thinkers; living ones not memorable in photographs, and not a synopsis. Insofar as essays give infor-

mation, and of course they do in their way, a peculiar condition of reciprocity, reader participation, prevails. Wit, the abrupt reversal, needs to strike a receptive ear or eye or else the surprise is erased, struck down. Expressiveness is an addition to statement, and hidden in its clauses is an intelligence uncomfortable with dogmatism, wanting to make allowances for the otherwise case, the emendation.

A well-filled mind itself makes the composition of essays more thorny rather than more smooth, with everything readily available. There is seldom absolute true assertion unless one is unaware. Words and phrases, ideas and opinions, invading the vast area of even the narrowest topic must fall back on a fluency of reference, reference sometimes merely hinted, if the convincing is to be achieved. Conviction itself is partial and the case is never decided. The essay is not the ground of verdicts. It rests on singularity rather than consensus.

Montaigne: can there be a reflection upon the essay without the dropping of this sacred name? Emerson finds Montaigne a "representative man" under the description the skeptic, as Shakespeare is the poet. A close reading of the essay will show that Emerson writes around Montaigne rather than about him. However much he may admire the French master's candor and "uncanonical levity," the men are not attuned, differences in temperament being too great. Gass, in his essay on Emerson, slides into a diversion on Montaigne and notes, "Have we digressed, however? I hope so." Hannah Arendt in her writing on the great modern essayist, Walter Benjamin, remarks upon the difference in the social station of the modern essayist when compared to the world of the classical European man of letters.

The world of the American essay is a democratic one, a meritocracy. And much more so now than in the time of Emerson, a man from the old Harvard, well-educated in a nation commonly much less so. The tones of "Self-Reliance" and even of "Compensation" would not appear to be suitable orchestration today. Confidence it has, if very different from the given, worldly self-confidence of Montaigne. Emerson's confidence, his attraction to enlightened sermonizing, is addressed to an audience still small enough for instruction. "The man must be so much, that he must make all circumstances indifferent."

Modes of conduct — except for that of foreign policy, which is impersonal in spite of pleas to view it as a burning pan on the stove in the kitchen of every citizen — commend themselves as a subject mostly to cranks and uplifters and health fiends. If we would in the manner of Lord Chesterfield tell a young gentleman how to behave, the pages might take the form of case histories of drug addicts, dropouts, and statistics on earning power. The American essay, the contemporary one, is personal in its manners, as a display, and also as a wrestling with means, how to shape the exposition. Little is proposed as a model. The personality of the literary critic is sharp and — with the most gifted — eccentric, but it wishes to reveal a difference in itself, not to promote imitation in manner, but only imitation in opinion, since every opinion loves a follower.

We have here seventeen essays published in the year 1985, seventeen humours, as Montaigne said he had a thousand within himself. Most gathered here are self-propelled, and a few are responses to an occasion. All have knowledge, casually at hand, the knowledge of a free and unbound intelligence and sensibility. None reflects expertise, a more mechanical acquisition suggesting usefulness rather than passion. Some are straightforward and some wind through the paths of memory, the unmapped individual experience. Such is the way in the art of the essay.

ELIZABETH HARDWICK

Contents

Foreword by Robert Atwan ix

Introduction by Elizabeth Hardwick xiii

Julian Barnes. THE FOLLIES OF WRITER WORSHIP

from The New York Times Book Review

Donald Barthelme. NOT-KNOWING 9

from The Georgia Review

Joseph Brodsky. FLIGHT FROM BYZANTIUM 25

from The New Yorker

*Alexander Cockburn. HEATHERDOWN: A LATE IMPERIALIST
MEMOIR* 66

from Grand Street

Gerald Early. THE PASSING OF JAZZ'S OLD GUARD:

*REMEMBERING CHARLES MINGUS, THELONIOUS MONK,
AND SONNY STITT* 93

from The Kenyon Review

*Kai Erikson. OF ACCIDENTAL JUDGMENTS AND CASUAL
SLAUGHTERS* 116

from The Nation

*Robert Fitzgerald. WHEN THE COCKROACH STOOD BY THE
MICKLE WOOD* 130

from The Yale Review