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The Contemporary Essay

Donald Hall

THE CONTEMPORARY ESSAY

EDITED BY
Donald Hall

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For Nan and Dick Smart

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Preface for Instructors

The Contemporary Essay is intended for composition instructors who believe, as I do, that much of the best recent writing in America is nonfiction — and who regret that more of this excellent writing does not appear in composition anthologies because it defies rhetorical or thematic classification. Instructors who use this book will demand from their students sustained attention to essays that are longer and more challenging than usual. But good prose and good thinking require each other; a composition course that demands more attentive and thoughtful reading will encourage attentive and thoughtful writing.

The Introduction that follows speaks to the diversity of the writers assembled here. This anthology could have been three times as long without lowering its standards; my final selection of thirty-four essays was necessarily arbitrary. I arrived at the mix by seeking diversity in tone, in level of difficulty, in strategy, and in subject matter: *The Contemporary Essay* entertains matters of economics and fashion, dinosaurs and hamburgers, surgery and the marginal farm.

The chronological arrangement of the essays makes for arbitrary juxtaposition. But any rhetorical or thematic organization would belie the actual range and variety of these essays. Very few could easily associate under one topic heading; no essay exemplifies only one rhetorical device.

In both its choice of selections and its editorial apparatus, *The Contemporary Essay* tries to avoid the condescension to students endemic to so many composition anthologies. I assume that students have dictionaries; I assume that the class uses a rhetoric or a handbook. Therefore, I do not footnote words easily available in dictionaries or gloss common rhetorical terms. The Introduction gives advice about reading in general, and the headnotes supply help toward reading each essay. After each selection, I provide questions under a variety of headings — questions about content and about strategies or style, explorations further afield, comparisons between essays, and topics for writing. These questions should be useful not only in class discussion but also for students reviewing the essays before rereading. At the back of the book is an index to passages that illustrate the rhetorical modes. An instructor's manual continues the discussion initiated by the questions.

My debts in assembling this collection are many. I am indebted to writers and editors, to my old teachers and to colleagues at the University of Michigan where I taught for many years. I am indebted to students. In recent years, I have talked about teaching exposition with composition staffs at many colleges and universities, from Lynchburg College in Virginia to the University of Utah in Salt Lake, from the University of New Hampshire to Pacific Lutheran in Tacoma, Washington. I wish to express my gratitude to more people than I can name.

More locally, I am indebted to Jane Kenyon who proofread, to Lois Fierro who typed (and re-typed, and re-re-typed). At Bedford Books, I am always indebted to Charles Christensen, who approached me about this book remembering my wistful notion of years ago. I am grateful as well to Joan Feinberg, who helped early, and to Sue Warne, who helped late. I am grateful to Tim Evans for help with the questions after the essays, and to Margaret Holmes for her answers in the Instructor's Manual. I am grateful to Nancy Lyman and to Ann Packer for many specific chores. I am grateful to Barbara Flanagan, who copy-edited this immense manuscript, and to Helen LaFleur who saved me from many errors. Donald McQuade gave excellent and useful advice, especially when I was planning this book.

D. H.
Wilmot, New Hampshire

Introduction for Students

On These Writers and Their Work

Often one literary form dominates an era. In Shakespeare's time the play was the thing, and lyric poets and pamphleteers wrote for the stage when they turned aside from their primary work. A few decades ago, American novelists wrote novels when they could afford to, but paid their bills by writing short stories for *Colliers* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Today the same novelists under different names — Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, John Updike, James Baldwin — become masters of the essay, for we live in an age of exposition.

We live in a time bewildered by the multiplicity of information; we cherish the selection and organization of information by our best writers. We live in a time that allows writers freedom to choose what they investigate, to follow their thoughts wherever they lead, and to use a variety of styles and strategies. Therefore the essay thrives, and many of our best essayists are writers for whom, as Annie Dillard puts it, the essay is "the real work." Obviously it was always the real work for E. B. White. In our age, we are also

fortunate to read essayists whose real work is science — the exposition of technology is a major necessity — and who write brilliant prose in the service of medicine, economics, and paleontology. We are fortunate also in an extraordinary group of women now writing on diverse matters: Alison Lurie, Frances FitzGerald, Diane Johnson, Annie Dillard. The editor's burden, in this age of exposition, is to choose wisely and representatively among the dazzling variety of the best. We have tried for diversity of author, style, and subject.

Contemporary factual writing explores the universe. This book begins with an account of old age written by an octogenarian; then an essay describes a circus scene — only to leap sideways and engage the subject of racism; next an economist analyzes the structure of American corporations. Our writers explain, describe, narrate, argue, and reminisce about childhood, men and women, the Arizona desert, bad habits of the civilized mind, fast food, dinosaurs, education, rape, a marginal farm in Kentucky, surgery, the fourteenth century, baseball, astronauts, the history of medicine, snobishness, a Republican political convention, clothing, computers, television, oranges, murder, mothers, and nuclear holocaust. Nothing human is alien to the essay.

As subjects of these essays vary, so do their length and difficulty. Walker Percy's philosophical ideas and John Kenneth Galbraith's observations on corporate structure both make difficult work for the reader, but the difficulty is appropriate and necessary: If such paragraphs were not hard to read, they would oversimplify their subjects and misrepresent them. At the other extreme, Calvin Trillin's reminiscences of Kansas City hamburgers and Eudora Welty's of a neighborhood store do not tax our attention; here, difficulty would be inappropriate.

These essays also vary in their strategies. Alison Lurie speaks of clothing by constructing a long and ingenious analogy to language. Richard Rodriguez describes his growing up, using personal narrative for purposes of persuasion, as he discusses ethnicity and bilingualism. Mounting an argument about medicine and scientific research, Lewis Thomas establishes his premises by a narrative of medical history. These differences in strategy derive partly from subject matter, but also from the diverse abilities and interests of their authors. Even if Lurie wrote about medicine, and Thomas about fashions and clothing — an improbability we might enjoy imagining — their strategies would differ.

These diversities show in voice and tone. It pleases John McPhee to use his skill partly in self-effacement; this author's talent renders the author invisible behind his subject matter. On the other hand, no one will accuse Norman Mailer of invisibility; his essays often feature a character called "Norman Mailer," sometimes under a pseudonym like "Aquarius." Even when he writes scientific exposition, with a studious clarity, his own personality

remains visible and becomes a part of his strategy of exposition. Other writers like Annie Dillard (and, in a different way, Jeremy Bernstein) include themselves in their stories. Some like Tom Wolfe leave themselves out but fly the flag of an idiosyncratic style. Frances FitzGerald and Jonathan Schell, more like John McPhee, cultivate an art by which the story tells itself.

In subjects and strategies, this book offers a diversity for study. Yet when we look at the prose of these writers from a distance — for instance, from the vantage point of another century's style — we realize that certain agreements about writing unite the distinct minds of Truman Capote and Roger Angell, E. B. White and Frances FitzGerald. These writers agree, by and large, to use the concrete detail in place of the abstraction; to employ the active not the passive mood; to withhold the adjective and search for the verb. They agree to pursue clarity and vigor. And most would agree with Robert Graves (English poet, novelist, and essayist), who said some years ago: "The writing of good English is . . . a moral matter."

Graves wrote these words in the late 1930s, shortly before George Orwell (novelist and pamphleteer, author of *Animal Farm* and 1984) wrote "Politics and the English Language," an essay which introduced or codified many assumptions about modern prose style. Orwell noted that the vices of vagueness, triteness, jargon, and pomposity are often not merely errors; often they serve the purposes of deceit. A clear prose style will not deceive others, and will help the writer to avoid self-deceit. Even earlier, the American poet Ezra Pound had talked about closing the "gap between one's real and one's declared meaning." Bad writers are vague ones. The novelist Ernest Hemingway said: "If a man writes clearly, anyone can see if he fakes." These writers reached a consensus which emphasized, in Pound's words, that "good writers are those who keep the language efficient . . . accurate . . . clear."

Much good nonfiction works the way an efficient machine works, by directness that matches energy to production. A sentence is good the way an ax handle is good. Order and organization move from writer's mind to reader's by the ethics of clarity in sentence structure and transition. For good prose to aid us, both socially and psychologically, it need not speak of society nor psyche; for good style, all by itself, is good politics and good mental hygiene. Thus John McPhee, who writes without revealing his values, contributes to ethics by the lucidity, clarity, and vigor of his exposition.

But efficiency and clarity are not the only values we derive from good style. It is true that sentences show us around the surface of the globe, lead us from one place to another; but sentences also dig beneath the earth's surface. The subjectivity of much contemporary writing — private feelings publicly exposed — provides a model for self-examination. Thus we find room not only for John McPhee but also for Annie Dillard, with whom we explore underworlds of feeling. If she did not write with the efficiency and clarity of

a John McPhee, her self-exploration would reveal nothing. But because she writes with intense clarity about matters seldom regarded as clear, the light of the imagination blazes in a dark place.

On Reading Essays

We read to become more human. When we read *Gilgamesh* — the oldest surviving narrative, a Babylonian epic from two thousand B.C. — we connect with other human beings. We raise a glass across four thousand years of time and drink with our ancestors the old wine of friendship, courage, loss, and the will to survive. And in *The Contemporary Essay*, when we read Jeremy Bernstein on scientific history or Alice Walker on her mother, we find another kind of linkage. We connect, not across chasms of millenia, but across contemporary gaps of knowledge and experience. We read for information and pleasure together. We read to understand, to investigate, to provide background for decision, to find confirmation, to find contradiction.

We also read in order to learn how to write. If we study architecture, we learn in part by studying structures already designed and built. If we study basketball, we learn in part by watching other players dribble, drive to the left, and shoot. Although in learning anything we add our own flourishes, develop our talents and overcome our drawbacks, we build on things that others did before us. For the writer of essays today, the things done are the essays written yesterday. We build on others' work and add our own uniqueness. Many professional writers, not only students in composition classes, prepare for the day's work by reading an admirable example of the kind of prose they undertake — for the example of excellence, the encouragement of brilliance, the stimulation of achievement.

APPROPRIATE READING

Reading is as various as writing is. If we read well we read differently according to what we read. Suppose when we eat breakfast we look at a daily paper; later in the day we take on a philosophical essay, a poem, a chemistry assignment, *People* magazine, and the instructions in a box of film. If we try reading the newspaper as we should read the poem, nightfall will find us halfway through the first section. If we try reading the philosophy essay as we read *People*, the essay passes us by. Every piece of print requires a different level of attention; good readers adjust their speed automatically when they read the first words of anything. Something tells them: "Slow down or you'll miss out!" or "Speed up or you'll bore yourself to death!"

In our education, in the culture that shapes us, we acquire unconscious habits of reading. Some habits are good, some bad. It helps to become conscious of how we read; it helps to learn appropriate reading.

ACTIVE READING

A century ago, even sixty years ago, silent reading was noisier to the mental ear, because people were used to hearing books read aloud. Long church services included much reading of scripture. Home entertainment was reading aloud from novels, scripture, or poetry. Public entertainment — before radio, films, or television — was lectures, debates, and dramatic recitation. In school students memorized pieces for speaking and read aloud to their classmates. Because students practiced recitation themselves, they could not read a text in silence without considering how they would say it out loud. Unconsciously, as they read alone, they decided in what tone or with what feeling they would enunciate each word.

Mental mimicry makes for *active* reading. We cannot supply the tone of a word unless we understand its meaning. Nowadays, most of us grow up passive readers. Our passivity is encouraged by television, which provides everything for us, even a laughtrack to tell us when to laugh. This collection of essays is intended for students who want more than printed television. These essays require active reading.

A few years ago I taught a composition class in which I assigned an article by Richard Rhodes called "Packaged Sentiment." This essay about greeting cards came out in *Harper's*, addressed to an audience which would expect to find that magazine contemptuous of prefabricated emotions. But the sophisticated author took pains to explore the opposite of the preconception; he made a limited, reasonable defense of the greeting card industry. At the end of his argument, he quoted an English novelist's qualified praise of a political institution: "I celebrate [greeting] cards as E. M. Forster celebrated democracy, with a hearty two cheers." When my students came to class that morning I wrote on the blackboard: "Five minutes. Why *two* cheers?" I expected them to tell me why Rhodes's praise was incomplete. They told me something different: They told me what Rhodes found to praise about greeting cards, as if I had asked, "Why *two* cheers?"

My students were victims of passive reading. They read Rhodes's essay, and accepted "two cheers" without asking themselves, "Why two rather than twelve, or one, or ten million?" When I said this much at the next meeting of the class, three or four students slapped their palms on their foreheads — the classic gesture: "How *could* I have missed that one?" These students learned a lesson; they had neglected to read actively, and to note that Richard Rhodes withheld one third of the normal tribute: "Three Cheers! Hip Hip Hooray! Hip Hip Hooray! Hip Hip Hooray!"

Those students who got the point should never again forget that three is the normal number for cheers. But how would they keep from making the same kind of mistake in further reading? How would they learn to read actively, engaging the text, requiring the text to make sense? Here is a series of answers to these questions.

1. *Learn the model for active reading.* Put the author on the witness stand and make him tell not only the truth, but the whole truth. Give the author the benefit of the doubt — expect him to reveal himself if you work hard at it — but be prepared on occasion to discover that the author, rather than the reader, is at fault (illogic, missed step in an argument, unfairness, lack of support).

2. *Adjust the speed of your reading.* Learn to adjust your reading to an appropriate speed. Most of these essays ought to be read slowly, but their demands will vary. It should take twice as long to read a page of Annie Dillard as it does to read a page by Joan Didion. (I refer to the essays by these writers in this book. Joan Didion is sometimes, appropriately, slower reading, and Annie Dillard faster.) If you tend to read quickly, learn to slow down when it is appropriate. If you tend to read slowly, make sure that your slowness results from close attention to the text, and not from a wandering mind. But be neither a slow reader nor a fast one: Be an appropriate reader, adjusting your speed to the text you are reading.

3. *Take notes as you read.* Everyone should take reading notes; they help to make sure that you understand *as* you read. Pause regularly, perhaps at the end of each paragraph, at least at the end of every page or two, to inspect yourself and your text. Underline the most crucial sentences, passages with which you tentatively disagree, and phrases you need to return to. Ask yourself: Do I know where we are and how we got there? Why are we entertaining *this* subject, in *this* essay? Try to answer yourself, in a note. Write in a notebook or on the margin of the page. When you commit yourself by writing a note, often you recognize that your understanding is less secure than you had considered it.

4. *Look up what you need to know.* Learn what it is appropriate to know exactly, and what you can understand approximately. If an essayist on medicine refers to “the etiology of disease,” we need to understand the word “etiology” in order to follow the sense. We turn to the dictionary. On the other hand, the essayist may refer to a particular disease by a long Latinate name, in a context where we understand that the word is an example and that the exact nature of the disease (which we could discover scurrying from definition to definition in a dictionary) is irrelevant to our understanding of the sentence. Learn what to look up, and learn what not to look up; this knowledge resembles social tact. If you are in doubt, look it up, but mature readers when they read Lewis Thomas need not trace down “subacute bacterial endocarditis” in a dictionary. They can figure out the first two words and they need not know the third: They know a “for instance” when they see one.

5. *Read and re-read.* Most important: Read, re-read, and re-read again. When your teacher assigns an essay, read it through the first time as soon as you can. Read the headnote first; read the essay at an appropriate speed,

pausing to interrogate it; take notes and underline; use a dictionary. Then read the questions that follow the essay. Using the questions as a guide, think the essay over. Consult your notes, look back at the text for difficult points, think about the whole essay — and then sleep on it. It is useful to come back to *anything* a second time after an interval, especially after sleep-work. Never write a paper or read an essay once only, at one sitting, even if it is a long sitting.

When you return to the essay a day later, re-read the questions first, and keep them in mind as you re-read the essay. Re-read the headnote, which should be more useful the second time. Re-read the essay more slowly, now that you know its plot, and take further notes. Take notes on the questions. Take notes on your notes.

6. *Make your own list.* Finally, there are problems that vary from reader to reader. Think about your *own* problems in reading, before you begin to read each essay assigned. Study your own reading to identify mistakes made in the past. ("How did I manage *not* to notice that 'two cheers' is a diminution of 'three cheers'?") When a neighbor in class finds more in an essay than you found, interrogate yourself. What in your reading prevented you from getting it all?

Keep a list, at the front of a reading notebook, of injunctions that you need to remember. "Pause after every page to summarize." "Watch for transitions." "Look up words." Toward the end of term, maybe you can cross some injunctions out.

Everyone assigned this textbook knows how to read. Everyone can improve as a reader.

When we improve as readers we improve as writers. By observing Malcolm Cowley or John McPhee or Annie Dillard solve a problem in writing, be it as small as a transition or as large as an essay's whole shape, we add to our own equipment for solving problems of style and construction. By reading we also improve as human beings; we increase our ability to absorb the history of our species, preserved in the language of the tribe through time, and in the language of our contemporaries in an age of the essay.

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