THE ESSAY REVIEW

IMPROVED

For the easy attaining of the true reading of nonfiction

TO WHICH IS ADDED

Douglas Atkins
William Bradley
Colin Hosten
Jill Talbot
Francesca Rendle-Short
Robert Root
Sonya Huber
Joe Bonomo

IOWA

ISSUE #2, FALL 2014
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Douglas Atkins, *The Course of Interpretive Discovery* 07
William Bradley, *We Try* 31
Colin Hosten, *Essay, Collection or Memoir* 41
Jill Talbot, *On Syntax* 57
Francesca Rendle-Short, *On Drawing (Essaying) Nonfiction* 81
Robert Root, *Essaying the Image* 95
Sonya Huber, *The Mind and Heart and Gut at Work* 107
Joe Bonomo, *Lamb and Lester* 113
EDITOR’S NOTE

Thank you for reading this issue of The Essay Review. Though our contributors fearlessly tackle the complexities of the genre, our goal is still a simple one: to keep you excited about the essay. This issue’s “essays on the essay,” which vary greatly in their form and content, have been handpicked and arranged to begin a conversation. Our contributors argue the existence of image in essay, anger in essay, metaphysics in essay—among other worthy topics. Our journal’s identity can be found in these moments of emotion and revelation, and we hope that The Essay Review feels like a warm and lively conversation with friends and colleagues. We are now an official University of Iowa publication and look forward to a bright future.

Cheers,

Michal Milstein
Editor-in-Chief

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. . . the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up”

It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one’s own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one’s strength.

—James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son”
Embracing tension, the essay lies between literature and philosophy, experience and meaning, fiction and fact, tradition and the individual, timelessness and time, a *via media* creature (which does not, contrary to appearance, equate with “middle ground” or the moderate). The tension everywhere present in the essay, rooted in the here-and-now through which it works towards timelessness, which it comes to realize as inhering—inhering—in the here-and-now, is crucial to an individual essay’s success. Take the essays collected in Scott Russell Sanders’s admirable *The Force of Spirit*. Typically engaging, these essays reflect Sanders’s trademark sympathy, the capaciousness of his imagination, and the genial warmth and generous magnetism that attract more and more readers. Once, I find, you go beyond the initial reading and the necessary sympathy with which that must be conducted, and you begin to allow for critical judgment to emerge, you find something missing. It is absent from the Introduction on. Matters are too easy, Sanders bent on peace and peaceableness, a kind man who has trouble dealing with trouble, a point he underscored in an earlier and much-anthologized essay about his alcoholic late father “Under the Influence.” Here, introducing *The Force of Spirit*, he avers that the assembled essays “grew from seeds of bewilderment and wonder,” but we are allowed to see very little of either. Sanders briefly mentions climacteric events in his life that shaped his thinking and feeling and that led directly to this writing, including his son’s and daughter’s growing-up, his father-in-law’s series of strokes, his own mother’s death. But we get none of these events represented, only reported on and thus dealt with at best as cause. Sanders goes on to record some of the searching questions with which he was “struggling,” but those questions do not figure in the foreground of the essays that follow. He emphasizes the “bind[ing] back together” that the word “religion” itself connotes, and then describes “the rhythm of my days—a scattering and gathering, scattering and gathering.”
A brief look at Thoreau will clarify matters as well as allow implications to emerge. Often regarded as the quintessential American essayist, in any case, a writer more often mentioned (and revered) than actually read, the author of *Walden*, itself a collection of essays, famously declared in its second paragraph: “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,” he proceeds, beginning to lecture us, “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.” Of course, we actually get very little autobiography in *Walden*, but the voice we hear—lecturing, even hectoring—reflects, I am emboldened to say, Transcendentalism at its worst and most unattractive, its most ungenerous and unsympathetic. Thoreau shows hardly any compassion for us ordinary mortals, whom he literally and metaphorically rises above. He may not be a Puritan, but he quests for purity, thus his forsaking for two years “the mass of men who lead lives of quiet desperation” in order to live alone, and apart, at Walden Pond. The problem is, he has so much wrong, exactly backwards in fact. Thus he writes, in a passage that many now carry in their heads and not a few have plastered above their beds: “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.” This, in the Conclusion, effectively undercuts and vitiates, rather than merely deconstructs, his earlier *question* “Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in the same proportion to the heavens above?” For all his notice and mention of the particulars of such nature as he observes, still within easy walking-distance of town, drunk on an imagined sense of wildness, Thoreau seeks to rise above the world, a flyer and escapist like Joyce’s anti-hero Stephen Dedalus; Thoreau too would “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (italics added, from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). Both are Moderns, both spiders, creating solely out of themselves (to borrow Swift’s distinction, in *The Battle of the Books*, between Ancients and Moderns).
The well-known essay “Walking” confirms what *Walden* sometimes blankets. Thoreau represents himself as a “saunterer,” zealously deriving the term from “’a Sainte-Terrer,’ a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander” and espousing a commitment, not just as earlier to “Higher Principles” (italics again added), but also to universalism and a home elsewhere: “sans terre, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere.” Nothing could be more unessayistic than this flouting of particulars and, particularly, the notion of place in which we are all, as human beings, rooted, willy-nilly.

Thoreau, though, privileges spirit, even as he admitted very earlier in *Walden*, without lamenting or seeking to correct it, “the narrowness of my experience.” He would not, he says in “Walking,” have us “confine[d] . . . to the public road” (Thoreau’s emphasis). His is a private, inner world, whose home is only in the higher reaches. Having quoted Sir William Habington’s account of “home-cosmography,” at the beginning of the final essay in *Walden* (that term apt for the essay as form), Thoreau, who made a modest living by surveying, writes in “Walking”: “We would fain take that walk, never yet taken by us through the actual world, which is perfectly symbolical of the path which we love to travel in the interior and ideal world” (italics added). It is no news at all when he adds, a bit later in this essay spoken in favor of “wildness,” “I confess that I am partial to these wild fancies, which transcend the order of time and development.” The terms are fraught with unintended revelation: “partial,” “fancies,” “transcend,” all pointing to failure to abide tension and remain in the *metaxy*. After deploring the fact, shared with Stephen Dedalus, that we “no longer soar,” Thoreau laments that “We hug the earth—how rarely we mount! Methinks we might elevate ourselves a bit more.” *That* he accomplishes—if above only his readers, looking down upon us and judging us. Thoreau evidently does not understand this world’s importance—nor that the Platonic pull is a temptation to be resisted. He cannot see that time is a ceaseless, unending purification.
Henry David Thoreau already knows—knows far more, or so he assumes, than us readers, whom it is his duty to educate and enlighten. He lacks both humility as well as openness, themselves characteristic of and essential to the essay from Montaigne to E.B. White, Scott Sanders, Sam Pickering, and some others. White’s well-known panegyric on Thoreau, published on the centenary of Walden’s appearance in 1854, “A Slight Sound at Evening,” is not unmitigated praise. White, who clearly admires this “hair-shirt of a man,” just as clearly recognizes his penchant for purity, his decision to go to the Pond as a “retreat,” the fact that Thoreau was torn by, and unable to join successfully, “two powerful and opposing drives—the desire to enjoy the world (and not be derailed by a mosquito wing) and the urge to set the world straight.” White, differently, opts to enjoy the world—and in the process manages to go some distance toward setting the world straight. He does so, unlike Thoreau, by a path indirect, one never bent on purity (see “Coon Tree,” a paean to im-purity and a rebuke of forms of “sanitation”), one that never transcends the world and the joys it furnishes. And all the while, White remains humble, indeed as self-effacing as Thoreau is overbearing and not infrequently mean. If White knows a lot—and he does—he never parades either knowledge or wisdom.

White is rooted, as his essay “What Do Our Hearts Treasure?” alone substantiates. Here he realizes just how much place matters, uprooted for Christmas in Florida at the time of the Vietnam war and amidst the pink stuccoes, the lawn flamingoes, and the artificial poinsettias, along with the pot-bellied Santas sweating in their incarnadine suits. He and his wife miss Maine and the smell and presence of fir and family. It is she, Katherine, gardener-essayist, who teaches him, not via a Thoreavian lecture, but her tears that “something far deeper than Southeast Asia was at work,” upsetting her. Even though “the crying spells ceased,” “it was plain [not “certain”] that was something the matter; it wasn’t Vietnam, it wasn’t the reverse-cycle system. It was some kind of unreality that pervaded our lives.” Reality returns only when a package arrives from Maine, bearing “the look and carr[ying] the smell of authenticity.”
something-deeper has to do indeed with family and the familiar and love and particulars, which White everywhere shows as mattering, indeed as rooting us, in the way politics, for instance, can never do.

E.B. White, I venture to say, relishes the letter, a plain-spoken man, given to common sense and wary of all sorts of systematizing, not least those many versions of Transcendentalism. He is not a particularly religious person, not even much spiritual, but he is no mere materialist either. In fact, he is not “mere” anything at all. Other essayists are more so, although few of them strive with Thoreauvian intensity and determination for a “haven” (White’s word) in a realm above the earth. If Scott Russell Sanders veers toward Thoreau’s idealism, others like Annie Dillard, Wendell Berry, and Peter Matthiessen manage to steer clear of Transcendentalism (see, for example, her “God in the Doorway,” which I consider in Reading Essays).

The tension lacking in Thoreau appears in White as a commitment to the physical and material world that does not obviate or forgo the possibility of meaning. It is not merely physical, although it is stubbornly and ineluctably that; the spiritual, or at least meaning, exists, but it does not reside outside or beyond this that we know in our blood and along our bones. As T.S. Eliot wrote in “The Metaphysical Poets,” it is not enough to look into, thence to know, the human heart, for “that is not looking deep enough; Racine and Donne looked into a good deal more than the heart. One must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts”—this from the most cerebral of poets!

Life is too short and precious for following the will-of-the-wisps “forged” by the mind or for spending too much time in cold corridors and the self-reflecting mirrors of that most untrustworthy and unreliable instrument, where only idea(l)s abound, graceless. For all the time he spent outside, surveying, measuring, and observing—Gulliver confined—Thoreau preferred the vast inner world. Having just abjured his readers to spend four hours a day walking, he writes: “I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit.” There he dwells, among the “higher principles,” his coldness reflecting the greater hell awaiting him, already separated and apart, from the warmth of necessary touch.
It would be a mistake, and a serious one, to conclude that tension thus marks Thoreau’s thinking and writing. Oppositions certainly exist, as we are seeing: outside/inside, particular/general, body/soul, to name only three. Rather than tension, reflected here is what Pierre Bourdieu lamented: pairs of oppositions, “conceived as insurmountable antinomies, absolute alternatives, in terms of all or nothing,” which thus “structure thought . . . [and] also imprison it in a series of false dilemmas.” Eliot for one spent his life writing against such confinement, purity, and part-iality, opposing “the thoroughgoing,” aware, with Antoine Compagnon, that “the truth always lies somewhere in between.”

Although Thoreau beseeches us to attend to the large and monumental things, and many, in like manner, would have you “not sweat the small stuff,” E.B. White knows that that is where you begin. It is, after all, what caused beloved Katherine’s crying spells that dreadful Christmas spent in Florida. It is, in fact, the starting-point for the essay, as the early writer in the form Abraham Cowley would teach us. Writing in 1668, Cowley affirms in his ironically titled “Of Greatness” that smallness is what counts, is in fact what he prefers in various aspects of his life: after quoting Horace to the effect that “The gods have done well in making me a humble and small-spirited fellow,” Cowley proceeds, in the manner familiar in essayists, embracing the beautiful rather than the (Romantic) sublime:

I confess I love littleness almost in all things. A little convenient estate, a little cheerful house, a little company, and a very little feast; and, if I were to fall in love again (which is a very great passion, and therefore, I hope, I have done with it), it would be, I think, with prettiness, rather than with majestical beauty.

White follows suit, like G.K. Chesterton (e.g., in “A Piece of Chalk”) and Hilaire Belloc (e.g., in “The Mowing of a Field”), beginning, perhaps paradigmatically in “Death of a Pig,” with the small, the common-place, and the ordinary (see Patrick Madden’s fine recent book Quotidiana), thence moving outward to the large implications incarnate in them.
Embodiment represents the essay’s manner. A person *embodies* the particular essay’s values; often this is the voice we hear speaking to us—rejecting that voice, say Thoreau’s—we reject the essay and its values. Zora Neale Hurston springs to mind in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” along with Belloc in the aforementioned “The Mowing of a Field.” In these, particularly striking instances perhaps but still characteristic of the essay as form, ideas function not apart from persons but, rather, as reflected by and in them; ideas reach their fulfillment in persons. Accordingly, Hurston *shows* not bitterness towards Whites but anger contained and difference in action; Belloc himself incarnates the respect, patience, and craft that his essay is all about. E.B. White does the same supremely well in “Death of a Pig.” Whether he was the first to do so matters little here, but Alexander Pope shows the way in his poem-as-essay, criticism-as-poem-as-essay, *An Essay on Criticism*, in which *he* emerges as the ideal critic. The terms of praise apply almost equally to the essayist as to the critic. Part-iality ruins the former perhaps as much as the latter, leading, if not always to “the thoroughgoing,” the “earnest,” and even purity, to the neglect of both other parts and the whole, precisely what Pope’s poem *demonstrates* (a point I argued long ago in an article on its structure). In another essay in verse, *An Essay on Man*, Pope proclaims himself “Slave to no Sect,” a point he takes great pains to represent throughout the *Imitations of Horace*.

Pope’s verses in *An Essay on Criticism* are made of the tension that he elsewhere endorses and embraces: e.g., “The lights and shades” of the mind instance “well accorded strife,” which “Gives all the strength and colour of our life” and “. . . jarring int’rests of themselves create/ Th’according music of a well-mix’d State.” He successfully, sometimes melodramatically, associates what too readily and too often get separated and divided. He not only “avoids” easy, misleading, structuring, and imprisoning oppositions, but his verse itself *embodies* the notion that “the truth always lies somewhere in between.”

The tension that Pope generally calls “difference,” when carefully considered, leads to the recognition expressed clearly in *An Essay on Man*: he who thinks rightly “takes no private road,/ But looks thro’ Nature, up to Nature’s God.” It is not one or the
other, contrary to Thoreau: either Nature or God. Nor is it enough to say that it is both. What Pope recognizes is the way in which you proceed in, through, and by means of Nature “up to Nature’s God.”

ii.

An Essay on Criticism

Writing of Geoffrey Hartman in The Reach of Criticism: Method and Perception in Literary Theory, his colleague at Yale Paul H. Fry calls “the roundabout course of his allusiveness . . . the course of interpretive discovery.” Having described his own preference for “a personable but philologically keen, densely allusive criticism that takes more and more diverse cues from its text than is customary,” Fry calls on to say that Hartman’s criticism, which “exemplifies . . . the staging of distraction,” “is the most realistic record we have of what literate reading is like.” Having studied, admired, and written about Hartman’s criticism, and having studied, admired, and written about the essay for much longer, I am inclined to think that the precise, apt, and elegant terms “the course of interpretive discovery” apply to all critical writing—or, rather, I wish to argue, Fry’s words define an essayistic criticism long established and now needed perhaps more than ever before. In fact, “the course of interpretive discovery” beautifully and effectively describes both the mode of criticism and that of the essay and so point to the inescapable, ineluctable, and welcome relation of the essay and criticism.

It is, of course, true that the essay is historically and traditionally the form that criticism has taken. Think of Dryden’s Essay of Dramatick Poesie, Pope’s An Essay on Criticism (which alerts us that essays need not be written in prose), the work of the English Romantics, that of such Victorians as Arnold, then Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, and on to Edmund Wilson and Allen Tate, and, most recently, William H. Gass, Hugh Kenner, James Wood, and a number of mainly British critics. The numbers have dwindled since the founding of university presses and of the Modern Language Association in the late nineteenth century. In the academization of
literary studies, the professional and “definite” article has replaced the essay as the manner and form of critical writing. A few years ago, the essayist and then-editor of The American Scholar, Joseph Epstein, observed, lamenting, that the last place you would be likely to find an essay is in the pages of the PMLA.

Things have changed a bit, with the “return of/to the essay,” its blinkered and belated recognition as “the fourth genre,” and the attraction has been enjoying of writers and readers like. The academy still, however, reveres the article, regards the essay with suspicion, and recommends—or requires, really—that the young and fledgling pledge themselves to the practice and inculcation of merely logical form, thesis statements, the “marshalling” of evidence, the avoidance at nearly all costs of the first-person and any autobiographical reference, all the while proceeding without regard to elegance of expression, grace, or art.

Earlier, in describing the essay as form, I have drawn attention to its “in-betweenness,” reflected, inter alia, in an abiding tension present from Montaigne’s so-called founding of the form at the end of the sixteenth century in France: between one thing and another, “hanging somewhere on a line between two sturdy poles, what I think and what I am” (Edward Hoagland), the essay is “almost literature” and “almost philosophy,” averred Eduardo Nicol: it walks a tightrope between fact and fiction, experience and meaning, process and product. It also always insists on embodied truth.

Neither quite one thing nor absolutely another, the essay bears traces of both one thing and another (to borrow terms from Derrida and deconstruction). Bred by reading and mentored by writing, the essay may best be viewed as a site rather than a thing, or genre: a place where apparent opposites meet and may cross. Is it literature, or journalism? An example and an instance of creative writing or of (what is called) composition, perhaps advanced composition? As a student and a professor of the essay, I was—I am now retired—afforded a place in our creative-writing program, in which I rested—if at all—rather uncomfortably (I was a site—and no doubt a sight). I taught reading the essay and writing the essay,
doing the one by also doing the other, refusing to separate writing and reading. Therein, taught by the form, may lie great promise for some sanity in literary studies, too long given to either/or choices and neat and uncomplicated pigeonholing.

To return, briefly, to the essay as in-between site: When Eduardo Nicol points to the form as being “almost literature” and almost philosophy,” he signals more than one crucial distinction, perhaps inadvertently. We may read his description as a variation on and indeed difference from, say, a Derridean sense of “both/and” (itself in apparent opposition to our familiar tendency to think, in the West, of more or less simple and relatively uncomplicated either/or choices). Key, I would suggest, is this: Borrowing a term from T.S. Eliot, which I have already used, I would say that the essay avoids the “thorough-going,” hence its historical skepticism, hence too its essential critical spirit. In its manner, in fact, the essay appears open, inviting, welcoming, even irenic, but it is a mistake to assume therefore that the essay lacks backbone, strong, courage, conviction, or determination. Truth to tell, the essay insists on its non-insistent manner. With essays, paradox abounds.

The temptation appears to be to kill off the essay, and not merely ignore or dismiss it. I do not mean to overdramatize here, but it is surely the case that the academy sacrificed the essay in its grand march towards professionalization and specialization: the essayist, said Virginia Woolf, is mainly “an amateur who has a done a little reading up,” and he or she has always cared about form as well as content, attentive to how he wrote while recognizing that the (Gnostic) desire for what cannot be separated from how. Get rid of concern with dress, expression, and form, and you can concentrate, unimpeded, on “content,” which is, after all, the point—it is always about the point (and the part), abstracted from the whole.

An amateur, the essayist is also a layperson as well as “a common reader,” with little use for the narrow or the recondite, the arcane or specialized knowledge. He or she is a Lord Munodi in a world given by his contemporaries to whoring after speculation, technical knowledge, and the theoretical: “every thing about him” may not be, as in Swift’s mouthpiece’s demesne, “magnificent,
regular, and polite,” but he knows better than the erstwhile “Projector” Lemuel Gulliver, fatally attracted to Laputa, “the floating island,” as “the most delicious spot of ground in the world.” Swift is the virtual essayist, standing behind Gulliver and letting him expose himself—as when he praises the hair-brained “scheme for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever . . . as a great advantage in point of health as well as brevity.” This invention, this “project,” might have succeeded absent essayistic understanding: if, that is, “the women in conjunction with the vulgar and illiterate had not threatened to raise a rebellion, unless they might be allowed the liberty to speak with their tongues, after the manner of their forefathers; such irreconcilable enemies to science are the common people.”

Laputan culture silences, sacrifices, and “scapegoats” the women as it does the admirable Lord Munodi. We all, though, or so it seems, have trouble with those who refuse to simplify and reduce, who insist on the necessity of tension, as did T.S. Eliot, who believed that “man lives in a world where tension rather than unity gives significance to his life”: “our temporal and spiritual life should be harmonized: the temporal and spiritual would never be identified. . . There would always be a tension.” Moreover, writes Eliot, we seem instinctively almost “to yearn for a ‘totalitarianism’ in which man would abandon the very agonies that ma[k]e him fully human”:

Totalitarianism appeals to the desire to return to the womb. The contrast between religion and culture imposes a strain: we escape from this strain by attempting to revert to an identity of religion and culture which prevailed at a more primitive stage; as when we indulge in alcohol as an anodyne, we consciously seek unconsciousness”

Unconsciousness is precisely, I am suggesting, what we do not wish to awake from, or be awakened from, as by essayists who exist in and embrace the tension that threatens our slumber and our (false) sense that security is possible. As long as clear differences and distinctions exist, as long, in fact, as we feel confident in the presence and prestige of either/or choices, we can drift, with reminders or hints of both/and the arch-enemy, the snake in the garden of our content.
Professionalization, such as that ushered in by the MLA and the ascendancy of universities especially as weaned on the Germanic models, necessarily entails the drawing of distinctions, the making of difference, and the creation of sectarianism. With definition, or the quest of it, follows the article (and the monograph, that is, the article writ large). The professional knows, or at least claims and pretends to, however narrow his or her scope and range; indeed, the restriction, and the definition, precisely allows him to know. Pope saw this world aborning, at the mid-point of the eighteenth century, his forecast as compelling and accurate as his exposure, his insight rather like his friend Swift’s a few years earlier—the speaker is the renowned Westminster Headmaster Dr. Richard Busby:

“Since Man from beast by Words is known,
Words are Man’s province, Words we teach alone.
When Reason doubtful, like the Samian letter,
Points him two ways, the narrower is the better.
Plac’d at the door of Learning, youth to guide,
We never suffer it to stand too wide.
To ask, to guess, to know, as they commence,
As fancy opens the quick springs of Sense,
We ply the Memory, we load the brain,
Bind rebel Wit, and double chain on chain,
Confine the thought, to exercise the breath;
And keep them in the pale of Words till death.
Whate’er the talents, or howe’er design’d,
We hang one jingling padlock on the mind. . . (Dunciad 4.149-62)

The learned Dr. Richard Bentley chimes in, echoing Busby and honoring the Goddess Dulness:

The critic Eye, that microscope of Wit,
Sees hairs and pores, examines bit by bit:
How parts relate to parts, or they to whole,
The body’s harmony, the beaming soul,
Are things which Kuster, Burman, Wasse shall see,
When Man’s whole frame is obvious to a Flea. (233-38)
Eventually Dulness herself caps the presentations, summarizing her essential direction and determined goals:

“O! would the Sons of Men once think their Eyes
And Reason giv’n them but to study Flies!
See Nature in some partial narrow shape,
And let the Author of the Whole escape:
Learn but to trifle; or, who most observe,
To wonder at their Maker, not to serve.” (453-58)

If the ascendancy of professionalization, specialization, and academization very nearly rang the death knell on the essay, now, I suspect, at least some modern and postmodern versions, modifications, and adaptations of this venerable form are designed to quell its implicit message. Human being cannot stand too much truth, sayeth Eliot, and I contend that, when it began to appear that the essay was not dead, had not been killed off, but, on the contrary, was beginning a renaissance, anxious souls, unable to abide life lived in tension and frightened by both/and thinking, decided to parry the essay’s essential thrust by turning the form into something different, something rarely recognizable by familiar standards but nevertheless called by the familiar term.

The tension that marks, and indeed characterizes, the essay as form creates further, significant effects. Consider beyond what I said earlier: The essay repudiates, indeed gives the lie to, the notion not so long ago bruited about of “the death of the author.” As a matter of fact, with essays there is no need to adduce an implied or implicit author or even, usually, a narrator, for the speaking voice we hear and respond to is the author. The essay simply will not tolerate a “disconnect” between the real, historical, biographical person writing and the voice we hear, although that voice is certained shaped, made for the occasion, a point well established in White’s essays and affirmed in recent work by Carl Klaus.

Essays assume a real, live reader—a person every bit as real and live as the essayist. The reader may be “gentle,” but he
or she may not purely imagined, fictive, or implied—no more a creation of the writer than the speaker is a creation of the reader. In that sense, a directness obtains, the reader present. Indeed, in essays the (Derridean sense of a) desire for presence is actively present and effective: Readers want closeness, and writers of essays accommodate. And yet—the essay is, as I argue in *Tracing the Essay*, very much an indirect form. “By indirections find directions out,” Polonius urged in *Hamlet*, and essayists largely, perhaps characteristically, subscribe to the old fool’s directions. The form’s notorious irony, first attributed to it by the theorist Georg Lukács in 1910, constitutes a telling case in point: It pretends to be about the small and insignificant, perhaps the shallow—a “second-class citizen,” said E.B. White with magisterial irony—all the while really having to do with “the Ultimate.” It reaches the large, the general, the universal, that is to say, via its vaunted attention to and emphasis of the small, the concrete, and the particular. The extra-ordinary appears—*pace* Cynthia Ozick, writing otherwise brilliantly in “The Riddle of the Ordinary”—precisely inside and within the ordinary. As a result, indirectness exists alongside—although not always in peaceful coexistence with—a desire for presence and the directness that is its confrere.

What I have been at pains to describe, and account for, may be suggested by the term independent spirit. It is so important that the distinguished publishing house Farrar, Straus and Giroux chose those words as the title for the Irish writer Hubert Butler’s posthumous collection of essays (see, for example, “The Writer as Independent Spirit,” written in 1966, following his participation in the International PEN Club Congress). Butler is noteworthy, although little known in this country. Fiercely anti-sectarian, Butler was attracted, to “Mitteleuropa,” as Joseph Brodsky wrote in a tribute:

*A man of immense learning, he was interested in this borderline zone, with its fusion of Latin and Slavic cultures, presumably because he sensed in their interplay the future of European civilization. Born where he was,
he couldn’t help being concerned with the fate of Christendom, whose natural son he was.

What Butler everywhere opposed was dishonesty: in Brodsky’s words “he was a dishonesty hunter.” Butler was possessed, indeed, of the essential qualities of the essayist, apparent in Hugh Bredin’s remarks in *Fortnight* and blurbed on the jacket of *Independent Spirit*:

> He has all the essayist’s gifts: a clear, strong prose, a fascination with everyday affairs and their significance *sub specie aeternatis*, a readiness to generalize, the ability to digress without wandering from the point, to inform without pedantry and enlighten without condescension, to give pleasure simply by sharing his thoughts.

And, I would add, to remain—in Pope’s words—“Slave to no sect,” where the emphasis falls here, first, on “Slave” and then on “sect.”

To refer to an undeniable “independent spirit” may not take us far enough in our attempt to describe the essay and account for its peculiar qualities and effects. We need to add—or, perhaps, to substitute—*critical-ness* (I try to avoid the term “spirit,” which, I find, threatens to countermand the essay’s fundamental—and anti-Gnostic—rootedness). For, in truth, the essay is inherently critical, a point already implicit in my foregoing words. Whether we think of Hilaire Belloc, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, or Richard Rodriguez, to take but a few familiar names, to which we might here add Dryden and Pope and Johnson, the essayist’s voice exists in uneasy relation—and tension—with the world that he or she observes so closely and on which he trains his intense scrutiny.

In some ways, of course, conservative, the essayist rarely if ever appears self-satisfied—that is a characteristic of Swift’s satirized speaker in *A Tale of a Tub*, a complex and technically sophisticated text that shows awareness of essays’ capacity for writing “upon Nothing.” Perhaps “preservative” functions better, more accurately, than “conservative,” for the essayist cannot bring herself to support the present or the established power or authority.
in any “thorough-going” fashion—here the notoriously anticlerical Restoration poet, dramatist, and critic John Dryden’s great verse-essay *Religio Laici or A Laymans Faith* is a telling and important case in point: a defence of the Established Church, and (therefore) the King, that nevertheless redefines the *via media* as a site between acceptance and assertion, tradition and the individual, clergy and laity. Essentially, the essay deconstructs the (easy, latitudinarian, and Romantic) notion of familiar opposition between writer and society, culture, or world. It does not quite accept nor merely set itself in crude, rude, and uncomplicated difference, and therefore opposition. Rather, it establishes a relation, and relation ineluctably and invariably involves a certain tension: neither clear identity nor absolute difference either. Perhaps better: *almost* acceptance, but not quite, and at the same time *almost* opposition—thus difference, and thus a position that I would submit is essentially critical.

Like the essay, critical commentary follows “the course of interpretive discovery”—at least, when it is understood, properly, as critical inquiry. The essay is as much about the way—the course—of the writer’s thinking as it is with any conclusion reached; in similar fashion, criticism may be about the way—that is, both the course and the manner—of reading rather than any conclusion attained. Commentary wedded to and dependent upon theory runs the risk, certainly, proceeding in a priori fashion, of vitiating the essentially critical nature of criticism: It knows, already, before and apart from reading, from encountering the text at that site we call reading. The essay’s “opposite,” as William H. Gass affirms, “the definite article,” does not allow for discovery, closed as it is to serendipity and bent upon convincing its readers of its conclusion, already known, announced, developed, and then merely repeated at the end.

An inherent narrative thus attaches to the critical enterprise: the story of reading. Like the essay, moreover, reading very rarely follows a strictly linear path; that path is, instead, mazy, meandering, liable to starts, stops, misdirection, indirection, fraught with interruptions, dangers, temptations, and subject always to the reader’s own willfulness. Something as little as a gnat’s wing may throw everything off; a slight misstep may doom the entire enterprise—and produce a reading wildly aberrant. Reading deserves
all the respect of a solemn ritual and should be entered upon, if not with solemnity, at least with the kind of observance, preparation, and self-control exacted by authority of other acts of communion, for reading is communion.

Poet, novelist, and critic Allen Tate helpfully called criticism “the passionate discourse of an amateur” (he was evidently recalling R.P. Blackmur’s definition as “the formal discourse of an amateur”). The mention of “amateur” bears no more surprise than the term “passionate”; both terms call attention to crucial qualities of the critical enterprise that we tend to forget—or ignore. In a sense, “passionate” is redundant, for an amateur, unlike the professional wedded to the dispassionate and merely logical article (or monograph), is passionate. The (amateur) critic cares—is, indeed, by a definition one who loves.

As Tate says, in the foreword to his friend Andrew Lytle’s essay collection *The Hero with the Private Parts*, the discourse he, and Blackmur, have in mind is “a kind . . . which even the exclusively critical writer can never make into an exact science. By ‘amateur,’” he supposes, Blackmur surely meant the man or woman “devoted to the object of his attention—literature, in this case—the man whose developing awareness and possession of the imaginative object becomes in the end self-knowledge.” The point also applies, of course, to the essayist—and note, here, Tate’s word “developing.” No better illustration of such criticism exists than Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, an imaginative representation of literature’s importance that makes of commentary nothing short of creation.

Dryden’s brilliant essay sets the stage—as well as standard—for all subsequent criticism written in English in another way, as well. Designed as conversation among four well-informed gentlemen and framed by the specific setting within earshot of the war with the Dutch, who are sailing up the Thames as the fictive figures leisurely sail not far away, passionately discussing a set of concerns having to do with the drama, the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* establishes, by implied comparison, the importance of the critical enterprise. Comparison, indeed, constitutes the mode of discourse: Not only do the four speakers—Neander, Crites, Eugenius, and Lisideius—
engage in comparison of, for instance, ancients and moderns and the French and the English, but their commentary that thus takes the form of comparison of the drama both parallels and draws attention to the four *embodied* representatives whose positions the reader compares in turn. When T.S. Eliot defined the tools of criticism as comparison and analysis (in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”), he affirmed what he had learned from the first major critic to write in English, his mentor, on whom he so often wrote.

Eliot, in fact, makes many, if not most, of his essays out of comparison, for instance, the famous discussion of the “dissociation of sensibility” via juxtaposition of Donne with Tennyson in “The Metaphysical Poets.” In the equally important though less familiar essay on Lancelot Andrewes, Eliot makes his most effective, and dramatic, points by way of comparison of Andrewes and the same John Donne. In like manner, Eliot offers crucial readings of Montaigne through comparison with Blaise Pascal. *Four Quartets*, Eliot’s greatest poem, works by means of the implicit invitation to the reader to compare resonant passages and both similar and seemingly contradictory positions. We may, then, speak justifiably and with confidence of the *comparative basis of criticism*.

Such comparison, I argue, requires *lateral* reading—a far cry from the allegedly “in depth” reading taught in the schools and smacking of the symbol-mongering that so often turns students off to the pleasures of poetry, especially. In order to make sense of a work like *Four Quartets*, you have to read laterally, listening for echoes, attentive to resonance and thus both similarity and difference, which leads us, willy-nilly, into comparing. Essays, in particular, open themselves up to lateral reading, perhaps even require it—they rarely seem to repay “deep reading,” being texts whose meanings lie not before the surface but on it. Lateral reading, whatever the text or genre, contrasts with the mining of texts for meaning and then its excavation. Reading laterally, you may well find yourself reading like a writer, mirroring the primary author’s essential strategies and procedures, locating his or her interests, and perhaps stumbling upon his intentions and her text’s apparent meanings.
Teaching Joyce’s great novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to Honors freshmen in a class just before I retired, I felt with both great intensity and powerful force the validity of lateral reading. It came as, throwing out my careful outline of the day’s lecture-discussion, I began with what I called a rather innocent-looking passage in the second chapter:

[Stephen] returned to Mercedes [in *The Count of Monte Cristo*] and, as he brooded upon her image, a strange unrest crept into his blood. Sometimes a fever gathered within him and led him to rove alone in the evening along the quiet avenue. The peace of the gardens and the kindly lights in the windows poured a tender influence into his restless heart. The noise of children at play annoyed him and their silly voices made even feel, even more keenly than he had felt at Clongowes, that he was different from others. He did not want to play. He wanted to meet in the real world the unsubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld. He did not know where to seek it or how: but a premonition which led him on told him that this image would, without any overt act of his, encounter him. They would meet quietly as if they had known each other and had made their tryst, perhaps at one of the gates or in some more secret place. They would be alone, surrounded by darkness and silence: and in that moment of supreme tenderness he would be transfigured. He would fade into something impalpable under her eyes and then in a moment, he would be transfigured. Weakness and timidity and inexperience would fall from him in that magic moment.

The passage invites the reader to linger over its words (including “brooded,” “image,” “different,” “unsubstantial,” “darkness,” “transfigured,” “impalpable,” and “inexperience,” which are charged with meaning, rather like poetry, to invoke Ezra Pound’s well-known definition. Of course, you feel the charge when you know the rest of the novel, particularly when, moving laterally, instead of vertically,
you compare such words to Stephen-no-longer-hero and you relate the quoted sentences to the upcoming non-encounter with the girl on the tram, his abject passivity (as when meeting the prostitute), the later (and parallel) so-called epiphantic beach scene, Stephen’s understanding of himself as “priest of eternal imagination,” and the penultimate diary entry at novel’s end when, in Luciferian perversion and pride worthy of Gulliver, Stephen arrogantly and blindly declares his desire cum expectation “to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race”).

Lateral reading, as I describe it, enacts “the course of interpretive discovery.” It results, like Geoffrey Hartman’s criticism, in brooding, deep and intense, and that brooding is at once abetted by and productive of the discovery of echoes and resonances, the critical ear very much engaged and active. Hartman’s “densely allusive criticism,” said Paul Fry, “takes more and more diverse cues from its text than is customary,” and so does lateral reading.

The article does not lend itself readily to comparison, or lateral reading. Its own manner *a priori*—from a declared thesis through logical evidence to a definite conclusion known from the beginning—the article, the essay’s “opposite,” avers William H. Gass, is assertive; if it has any doubts, it hides them, no skepticism permitted or acknowledgment of self-doubt. “Discourse” seems, indeed, the right word to describe its mode of being.

The essay, on the other hand, is conversational in manner, if not always in fact. Generosity lies at the heart of writing so understood. “Concorde” names the issue precisely: “concordia discors,” Pope had called it two centuries before. He comes as close as anyone I know to defining the ideal critic, the ideal critical essayist, when he describes that worthy endeavor as “Gen’rous Converse,” this in *An Essay on Criticism*. “Converse” seems to me a better term than “discourse,” for the latter lacks the former’s acknowledgment of necessary dialogue. Pope recognizes and enacts the equally necessary tentativeness, while concentrating on—and embodying via his brilliant couplets—“two and two,” differences and even oppositions, assisting each other, dancing together: “Which betokenth concorde.” Here is Pope:
But where’s the Man, who Counsel can bestow,
Still *pleas’d* to *teach*, and yet not *proud* to *know?*
Unbiass’d, or by *Favour* or by *Spite;*
Not *duelly prepossess’d*, nor *blindly right;*
Tho’ Learn’d, well-bred; and tho’ well-bred, sincere;
Modestly bold, and Humanly severe?
Who to a *Friend* his Faults can freely show,
And gladly praise the Merit of a *Foe?*
Blest with a *Taste* exact, yet unconfin’d;
*A Knowledge* both of *Books* and *Humankind;*
*Gen’rous Converse;* a *Soul* exempt from *Pride;*
And *Love to Praise,* with *Reason* on his *Side?*

Pope himself does it all, or very nearly everything: an *essay* on *criticism* performed in verse, bringing together wit and judgment, depicted (as if in anticipation of Eliot), as “meant each other’s Aid, like *Man* and *Wife*” (83), criticism done up as essay, an essay that *is* criticism, criticism become literature (or almost?), literature that is both critical and about criticism. It is time that we not merely acknowledged Pope’s insight but returned to such understanding of criticism and the essay as he offers, and his predecessor John Dryden as well. Criticism seems, always, to do with the relation of the individual and tradition. Said Eliot, writing about the poet, for whom

will be aware . . . that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past. I say judged, not amputated, by them; not judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead. . . . It is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other. To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art. And we not quite say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value—a test, it is true, which can only be slowly and cautiously
applied, for we are none of us infallible judges of conformity. We say: it appears to conform, and is perhaps individual, and may conform; but we are hardly likely to find that it is one and not the other.

We are thus invited, and indeed we are enabled, to compare—not least, criticism and the essay.
1. The students in my creative nonfiction class believe wholeheartedly in the adage “Honesty is the best policy.” This serves them well as nonfiction writers, but I worry that they might be a bit delusional about how honesty works in the adult world. Upon finishing Bernard Cooper’s memoir *The Bill from My Father*, several students complained that Cooper should have confronted his father over his sexual infidelities, defended the honor of his long-dead mother, pressed the truth out into the open, so that both father and son could have a cathartic moment of revelation and acknowledge the reality that they had refused to talk about.

I responded by telling these students that you can’t force a satisfying narrative, full of epiphanies and following the map of an inverted checkmark or Freitag’s triangle, on a memoir. We’re rooted to who we are, and who we have been, and real human beings don’t always behave the way we need for them to in order for the narrative to leave us feeling like we’d just read a well-constructed novel. Real life isn’t so neatly arranged, and the nonfiction we write needs to try to capture the truth in all of its inconvenient complexity.

2. My mother once begged me not to write nonfiction about my grandmother, which was kind of an unreasonable request because my grandmother once wished out loud that I would die so that my mother would learn a lesson about loss, the kind of lesson my grandmother herself learned when her oldest son, my mother’s brother, and one of the men in the family I’m named after, Billy died. And then, the following year, I developed cancer and had to have a bone marrow transplant.
I was 26 at this point, and convinced that I was Michele de Montaigne’s intellectual heir, destined to write the complete truth as I understood it, without straining or artifice. And this type of material—cancer and an angry grandmother’s curse—could probably get my book featured on Oprah.

“You can’t write about that,” my mother argued. “It would just devastate her.”

“But Mom,” I whined, “she’s the one who wished for me to die. I didn’t do anything wrong, and this is really good material.” My mother sighed. “Could you wait until she’s dead, at least?”

3. When my brother worked at a newspaper in upstate New York, a woman who worked with him—in circulation or classifieds or maybe answering the phone, but not in the newsroom—told him that she thought the U.S. shouldn’t give foreign aid to any other countries under any circumstances. “Do you know,” she asked him as they both stood outside the office, smoking their cigarettes in the snow, “that the United States is the only country in the world that gives money to other countries?” My brother stared at her.

“That’s simply not true,” he replied. “Name another one.” He began rattling off the names of virtually every industrialized country before she grew frustrated. “I was just expressing an opinion,” she said.

That’s the thing about facts—they only matter to those who recognize them. That which can be known objectively or scientifically might be something we “agree to disagree” on if the reality doesn’t match that which one’s audience would like to believe. So, include facts in your essay if you want. Or don’t. I would advise you against just making shit up, but don’t limit your essay to only that which is verifiable.

Frankly, I read essays for ideas, in order to encounter a unique human consciousness. Even a deluded consciousness is going to be interesting to read.
4. I sometimes use the words “memoir” and “essay” interchangeably, even though they’re not quite the same thing. Essays are focused on ideas, memoirs on experience. Both spring from the author’s consciousness, though. Both are records of a mind—thought and memory inevitably mingle. I don’t know how much thought turns a memoir into an essay, or how much action an essay into memoir. This isn’t something I lose sleep over, but I do worry that I might sometimes confuse people when I speak of nonfiction forms.

5. I am skeptical of anyone who writes an essay proclaiming “expertise”—particularly if it’s an essay on essays. I should tell you, though, that my first piece of published scholarship was an article that sought to delineate the ethical considerations a nonfiction writer “should” keep in mind. And while I still hold my own writing to the standards of truthfulness and factual accuracy I articulated in that article, it now seems to me unspeakably arrogant for a 30-year-old with three creative nonfiction publications on his curriculum vitae and still in his first year on the tenure track to tell other writers how they should approach their own work. I thought I was being bold, daring, audacious. Now I think I was probably just a dick.

6. I have a secret. Not about me—about someone else. Something I’ve never written about. Something I’ve only discussed with my wife and one family member. It is a secret that I think others might already know, but if they don’t, the results could be devastating.

7. That previous item is a lie. Oh, I have this secret that I’ve kept from a lot of people, but I realized—while I was writing this—that there are people I have told: I have told my creative nonfiction students, almost every semester. I tell them this devastating secret as an example of something I won’t write about while certain family members are still alive. Because even though, as Didion tells us, “Writers are always selling somebody out,” I have my limits.
8. One limit I have—until now, I had never written about my grandmother or her wish for me to die. She has been dead herself for seven years now. I had wanted to tell that story for a long time. Then, when she died and I was free to write it, I found I no longer wanted to. It no longer seemed as interesting as it once did. In fact, it’s a lot less strange, dark, and tragic than it seemed to me while she lived. If that anecdote is interesting at all, it’s only interesting in terms of what it reveals about choices nonfiction writers have to make sometimes.

9. Essays are always working. They exist as ideas in the essayist’s head long before pen is put to paper or fingers tap keys. More importantly, they articulate ideas that burrow into the reader’s mind and lay eggs. If that thought disturbs you, then you’re beginning to understand the power of the essay. Pope tells us that a little learning is a dangerous thing; for example, learning from Hazlitt that hating is a pleasurable act causes the well-intentioned reader consternation. How can this be? We’re supposed to love one another, aren’t we? But damned if it isn’t true—sometimes, I find hating feels good. But then I re-read my James Baldwin, Note how this Native Son observes that hate will consume and destroy the hater. And I realize this is true as well. This shit keeps me up, as those essays work the mind’s graveyard shift.

10. Orwell wisely identified “Sheer egoism” as one reason people write. To write about oneself, to declare to the world, “I watch General Hospital—now you should read why”... yeah, that’s some narcissism right there. You kinda want to belt such an arrogant jackass in the mouth. Yet the essay is also well-intentioned, honest, and an attempt to reveal perceived truth to the reader. Our patron saint Montaigne told us in his Essais that “Every man has within himself the entire human condition.” Our essays help us to discover that which we have in common in a world that wants to separate us into warring factions—blue state
vs. red state, atheists vs. faithful, people who like Nickelback vs. people who like music. The essay brings us together, reminds us of our common humanity.

11. But if the essay is egotistical, we must understand that it is never solipsistic. Solipsism requires one to doubt the authenticity of anything outside that individual’s mind. But the essayist requires a reader’s consciousness to interact with her own. I could write every thought that ever entered my head, but the entire exercise would be meaningless if I couldn’t be sure that your consciousness would encounter mine in order to engage with the ideas I engage—illness, grandmothers, soap operas, whatever. In this way, an essay is always a bet against solipsism, and is in its own way an act of faith.

12. An essay written but never shown to anyone can’t really be said to exist. Without the reader’s consciousness to consider the essayist’s prose, it remains static, ineffective, unconsidered—not an essay at all, really. Writers need readers. Of course, sometimes we need to write to ourselves, in our diaries or journals or early drafts that are not worth a reader’s attention. But the writer who never shares his work is no more an essayist than the virgin who masturbates a lot is a “player.”

13. I’ve noticed that many of the best memoirists I know call themselves essayists. It’s like memoir as a form is too tawdry, too sullied by the “inspirational stories” of “overcoming obstacles” standing in the way of “love” with “consequences” that can break the author into “a million little pieces.”

I want to tell these memoirists that they (we?) ought to reclaim their (our?) own form, to proudly proclaim, “This is my memoir—written in the glorious tradition of Speak, Memory and Stop-Time. It is not self-indulgent. It is thoughtful and complex and, above all, ambitious.” But then again, as I said before, I’m no longer interested in telling people what they ought to do with
their own writing—and I have my own problems with these labels anyway. Also, as I’ve said before, the line between essay and memoir is very fine indeed—if I can’t be sure what it is that I’m writing, I probably shouldn’t presume to explain to other people what it is that they’re writing. So I keep my mouth shut and watch my General Hospital.

14. My essays and memoirs are full of contradictions. In some, I suggest that I am a misanthrope who has to be dragged to dinner parties by my wife. In others, I admit that I really like people and find it easy to talk to strangers. My work is full of contradictions because my mind is full of contradictions. When you get right down to it, no narrator is ever reliable.

15. Here’s a fact: I’ve always wanted to research and write about Sylvester Graham, 19th century minister and dietary reformer. He promoted the health benefits of vegetarianism and warned about the dangers of chemical additives in our food. He invented Graham crackers, which were a staple throughout my childhood. What I didn’t know, when I was a kid, was that Graham invented his crackers because he thought bland foods curbed lust and prevented masturbation, which he regarded as a compulsion that led to insanity. Spicy foods and heavy meats, Graham argued, inevitably led to dolphin-flogging.

I’m paraphrasing.

The friend who first told me about Graham also told me that he was beaten to death by a mob of angry butchers. This is not true—the butchers merely threatened to riot when Graham was scheduled to give a speech in Boston. He actually died of natural causes—if an early death following a years-long diet of Graham crackers and water can be considered natural. Still, it’s fun to think of that group of angry butchers, coming after Graham, pummeling him with salamis and bolognas and hams. A meat-beating, if you will.
16. Because this is an essay and essays should reveal truth, I should tell you that I just realized that my own history of self-abuse started at around the time I stopped eating Graham crackers every day.

17. The past fades, landscapes change, and some things—often very small but kind of significant things—get lost forever. We don’t see pay phones anymore. No more ashtrays on airplanes. No more neon signs advertising “Color TV” in the windows of cheap motels. No more video arcades at the mall—everyone is playing Halo and Madden in their homes.

I guess maybe it’s silly to care about such things, but it makes me sad to think that the world is slipping away. The world that we live in tomorrow won’t be quite the same as the world we’re living in today, and very few of us will slow down and notice the tiny changes.

The world I have lived in is drifting out of sight.

I want to hold onto that world. I want to capture the world where 6-year-old Billy Bradley ate his Graham crackers while watching General Hospital with the cousin who was babysitting him while she talked on a corded phone. It seems worthwhile, to preserve a bit of the world as it was.

18. It’s all connected. Getting a puppy and naming him “Barkley.” John Hinckley shooting the president. The Challenger exploding in the Florida sky. Taking First Communion. Going to see Temple of Doom in the theater (but being taken out to the lobby during the “ripping-out-of-the-heart” scene). The fall of the Berlin Wall. Moving to a new town in the 10th grade. The election of Bill Clinton. Hearing Lou Reed’s New York for the first time and feeling like I’d just discovered something powerful and new. The siege at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. Kissing a girl for the first time (and knowing she’ll
eventually break my heart, because she has a boyfriend already). Losing faith in God. Having sex for the first time (different girl, similar heartbreak). Being diagnosed with cancer. Getting chemotherapy treatments while President Clinton promises “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.” Getting an autologous bone marrow transplant while President Clinton explains why he’s bombing Iraq. Losing faith in President Clinton. Rediscovering Faith in God. Receiving radiation treatments while India and Pakistan play a game of nuclear chicken. Watching the Twin Towers fall. Falling in love. Visiting the grandmother who wished, once upon a time, that I would die, nodding patiently as she confused me with my father, and realizing what a prick I am to have ever thought of selling her out in print. Learning a devastating secret. Getting political. Getting married. Getting published. Getting the shit knocked out of me, professionally speaking. Getting up, writing more, applying for university jobs, sending my book manuscript out into the world. Because it’s worth it.

This is a life. This life begets ideas. These ideas beget writing. It’s all connected.

19. And it will never stop. Not while I’m living.

20. If you have been reading this far waiting to hear the scandalous secret that I know, then I’m afraid you’re going to be disappointed. And I’m afraid you have perhaps missed the point. This secret I know doesn’t involve anyone you have ever met. It would only matter to a small number of us. The fact under discussion is, largely, immaterial; the story of this situation involves my own struggle with this knowledge, with the contradiction inherent in being both a writer of nonfiction—what James Wolcott might call an exhibitionist with an agenda—and a keeper of secrets. My mind is the plot, wherein these warring ideas of self are buried.

21. “Hold on to people, they’re slipping away.” Moby repeats this line fourteen times at the end of his song “Slipping Away.” And that, in the end, is why I feel so obsessive about documenting so much of the past as I remember it—it’s not just an exer-
cise in narcissism, exhibitionism, or intellectual masturbation, the way some critics of nonfiction forms lazily claim. And it’s more than abandoned buildings, cancelled television shows, and obsolete technology. It’s the people who lived, watched, and utilized. As time pushes us forward, we lose the world as it was and some of the people who inhabited it. We’re on a one-way trip to an undiscovered country. Our nonfictions—essays, memoirs, what have you—are the only records of the scenery we encounter along the way, imperfect and incomplete as they may sometimes be. Nous essayons, as our patron saint might insist.
Jerald Walker’s *Street Shadows* is subtitled “A Memoir of Race, Rebellion, and Redemption.” The book chronicles the author’s journey from troubled teenager to accomplished academic, and was hailed by Nikki Giovanni as “a powerful read.” “On the basis of this impressive literary debut,” writes Robert Atwan, series editor of *Best American Essays*, “I predict that we’ll be reading Jerald Walker for years to come.”

It is quite possible, in fact, that one place we’ll be reading Walker for years to come is in *Best American Essays*, where he’s been featured previously, and where some of the chapters from *Street Shadows* might have fit right in, since the book was originally conceived as a collection of essays. The memoir designation in the subtitle was added for publication. This particular detail is so striking because such rebranding has become commonplace in the contemporary publishing industry. Essay writers are now so frequently instructed to reshape their collections into memoirs or theme-driven narratives that the essayist Marcia Aldrich recalls the cautionary advice she once heard from author Cheryl Strayed, that essays are the “kiss of death in publishing.”

Yet essays continue to be published in great numbers under the umbrella terms of memoirs, chronicles, and meditations. What explains the aversion that many publishers have to the essay as a form for publication? Is it simply, as author E. J. Levy puts it, a “contrived conceit intended to market books”? Do readers even notice or care about the different designations? Kim Dana Kupperman notes, in “The Essayist’s Dilemma,” that the general reading public, “trained by the beginning-middle-end schema, desires an organizing principle, a structure that imposes meaning, even if it is quite nuanced.” Yet readers continue to consume and celebrate...
individual pieces and collections by classic essayists such as Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, Charles Lamb, and Washington Irving, and by more contemporary writers such as James Baldwin, Gore Vidal, and Joan Didion. What part of this equation has changed for the essay writer of today?

Robert Atwan suggests that the disparity in literary nomenclature “has been complicated by the history of genre and by our rhetorical expectations.” There was “greater tolerance for essayistic playfulness, artifice, and deception during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” he argues, “when ‘nonfiction’ was genuinely ‘creative.’” Readers have come to expect less narrative flair from essays, while the memoir genre suggests a more evocative read. But what does it mean that the lines between essay and memoir have become so blurred that so many essay collections are now published as memoirs? A healthy appetite for the creative work of essayists clearly exists, yet the modern publishing industry continues to disguise this work as memoir or other. How will this affect today’s essayists, who must continually rebrand and reshape their work for publication? What is the long-term effect on the reader’s perception of the essay as a literary form? And in a century of growing access to and consumption of short-form literature, is the designation between essay, memoir, and other types of nonfiction even going to be relevant for much longer?

I pursued answers to these questions and more from the perspectives of the different stakeholders in this process—author, editor, reader—via interviews with Jerald Walker, Marcia Aldrich, E. J. Levy, and Robert Atwan.

I. What does “Essay” Mean to the Author?

Jerald Walker is the author of Street Shadows: A Memoir of Race, Rebellion, and Redemption.

CH: Why did you choose to write the story of your life as a collection of essays as opposed to a traditional memoir? Are there specific aspects of the essay as a literary form that make it preferable to you?
**JW:** Actually, my publisher asked me to turn an in-progress collection of essays into a memoir. I write essays because I love the form, but publishers want books to have a “narrative arc,” and when I sold my manuscript it was on the condition that the essays become “chapters” and that the unwritten chapters fit into the arc of what would become a “memoir.”

**CH:** When you describe your book to friends, family, or professional acquaintances, do you call it a memoir, or a collection of essays? Why?

**JW:** I call it a memoir because that’s what it is, though I add that it started out as an essay collection.

**CH:** Is there an inherent aspect of the essay form that particularly appeals to you?

**JW:** My wife is fond of a cooking show where the chefs have to make tasty meals from a basket of seemingly incongruous ingredients: say, an apple, goat cheese, three pickles, a box of Fruit Loops, six eggs, and a can of spam. Essay writing is in many ways like that, trying to find ways to create meaningful stories out of the ingredients that life provided. Fiction writers can make things up, pull what they need from thin air. Nonfiction writers have to find ways to connect things that already exist.


**CH:** In “The Essayist’s Dilemma,” published by Welcome Table Press, you offer a defense of incoherence. Do you believe that the essay form lends itself to teleological arrangement at all? At what point does an essay collection stop being a collection, and become a different form altogether, such as memoir or book-length narrative nonfiction?
EJL: I don’t mean to suggest that essays are de-natured by being linked thematically or dramatically in a collection, only that the essay form has been—from its start—a marvelously meandering form, as Montaigne intended. It follows the mind’s movements as it weighs a matter rather than reaching certainty, so I’d like to argue that the essay collection may do the same: meander, offer a portrait of thought, represent the adventure that is cognition, rather than having to ape the drama of the novel or the memoir or the teleology of argument. But I think that much can be gained by wrestling with one’s essays to seek a common thread, which in turn can suggest additional essays and reveal new depths in the work. So, I’m not against collecting essays in a coherent fashion; I simply reject such coherence as a necessary condition for a successful collection.

CH: Can a group of essays come together naturally in a collection, or is this mostly an artifice prompted by other motives?

EJL: Oh, yes, of course. I love to read collections of essays to see how the same mind moves over different matters—or moves over the same matters at different times. I find that illuminating, not artificial at all. You get this with David Foster Wallace’s collections, for example. But I’m less charmed by collections that seem forced by their own conceit, in which you sense the writer straining to come up with one more thematically linked piece to fill out the book. I could name a bunch of those, alas, but won’t. It’s the heavy hand of marketing, I fear, and I don’t think those fingerprints should be on the essayist’s page.

CH: You’ve written that an essay collection is “a distinctly different kind of pleasure from reading a memoir or a novel.” How much of this pleasure is compromised when a group of individual essays are collected under a common theme—or further, rebranded as memoir?

EJL: Essays collected together are delightful, whether they have in common merely their author (as in Montaigne’s) or a subject.

Marcia Aldrich is the author of Girl Rearing and Companion to an Untold Story.
CH: Why are essay collections, as Cheryl Strayed once told you, “the kiss of death in publishing”? Is there anything about the essay as a literary form that might arguably be the opposite of a kiss of death—anything that might give essay collections a leg up in the publishing world?

MA: The essay is positioned as a literary form particularly savored by other writers for its stylistic merits, variety, and innovations, but maybe there are not enough of us, because the form is rarely a big seller. Lia Purpura is an example of a much admired writer in the world of essays whose collections have been published by a relatively small press.

When I speak of the essay collection, I’m primarily referring to collections of personal essays or literary essays. Collections of essays built around a hot button subject, or written by a “celebrity” writer like David Sedaris experience an entirely different reception. Sometimes I think I’m just the wrong person to ask about why essay collections are so difficult to publish because I love the essay. I enjoy reading one essay at a time, and then coming back later to read another. It’s a different reading experience from picking up where you left off in a memoir. Memoirs tend to have a more consistent tone and an unfolding narrative. I am a fan of anthologies and collections because each essay has the potential to surprise and transport me somewhere the essay before it didn’t take me. Given our much interrupted lives, I don’t know why the essay collection is struggling for its place at the table.

CH: Is there any strictly editorial value in packaging a book as a memoir versus a collection of essays? Or is this trend completely driven by sales and marketing?

MA: There is a wide and important difference between memoir and essays—they are not the same animal. Essays don’t have to be retrospective and focus on the writer’s life. They don’t have to be works of memory. Essays can be more investigative, immersive, subject and research driven, and most importantly, they don’t have to be organized around narrative. They can be lyric or driven by the impetus of thinking. Memoir appeals to publishers because it tends to be rooted in story and narrative and therefore is closer to the novel [in form], and more familiar to readers. The assumption is that a narrative in the form of a memoir is easier to read and therefore
easier to market. I don’t think that assumption is necessarily correct, but it is pervasive. On the other hand, the assumption is that one must learn how to read an essay—that essays are more difficult. Jo Ann Beard’s *The Boys of My Youth* was marketed as a memoir composed of essays. It is treated as a contemporary memoir, but not everyone is satisfied by that label. I have heard writers speak positively of the process imposed by a publisher to find and bring out a more continuous through-line in their collection of essays, that is to make the essays more cohesive and unfolding in time. I mention this because it is worth noting that not all essayists resist this trend toward memoir.

**CH: E.J.?**

**EJL:** I can’t speak to the editorial value, but I do think there’s an artistic value in examining one’s essays and seeing how they might form a memoir, what common obsessions or themes emerge, what might be left out or added. I think that lens can be a productive one for the writer, and that’s important. I find the collected essays in Gretchen Legler’s gorgeous memoir *All the Powerful Invisible Things*, more powerful for her rigorous effort to forge a connection among them. She does two things that make it work beautifully: first, she adds these brief, lyrical, interstitial essays that provide a structural link among the longer pieces; and two, she searched the material for what they had in common and found a profound story of how death is a necessary foundation of life. So both on a structural and thematic level, the effort to link those essays deepened the book.

**II. An Editorial Perspective**

**Robert Atwan** is series editor of *Best American Essays*.

**CH:** You, and others, have referred to current times as the “age of memoir.” What do you mean by that? Is there a corresponding age of the essay that you can identify in the past, present, or future?

**RA:** Of course, memoirs have been around for a very long time—Virginia Woolf’s Bloomsbury Group had a Memoir Club—but sometime around the early 1990s, critics such as James Atlas began to notice the way memoirs had taken the publishing world by storm.
In an important 1996 essay for the *New York Times*, Atlas tried to account for the growing popularity of the memoir as publishing houses began crowding their lists with the genre, many of these confessional, multicultural (Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father* being one of these ’90s memoirs), and many covering incest, alcoholism, depression, addiction, child abuse, family dysfunction, disability, and other topics that a generation earlier may not have been seen as appropriate unless published anonymously. The rapid rise of the memoir in some ways turned out to be a mixed blessing for the essay. Publishers were now extremely interested in personal nonfiction, but were demanding confessional, cutting-edge, or shocking stories as opposed to reflection or rumination on a topic; many insisted on nonfiction that had to be shaped by the so-called “narrative arc,” which isn’t usually essay-friendly.

CH: Regarding E. B. White’s “Death of a Pig,” you’ve written that we consider the piece an essay in large part because it appears in many essay collections. When it comes to literary form, does a rose by a different name read the same? How important are the designations of “essay,” “essay collection,” “memoir,” etcetera?

RA: The *I* of a personal essay (say, E. B. White) and the *I* of a first-person fictional narrative (say, Twain’s *Huck Finn*) are both, of course, literary constructs, though one purports to be autobiographical, and the other is a fictive character invented by Twain. To a large extent, both the personal essayist and the novelist avail themselves of similar literary devices and techniques (Twain’s first title for his novel was *Huck Finn’s Autobiography*). As everyone knows, it’s possible to write a fictional tale in the guise of a first-person narrative that behaves exactly as though the story were true. If you compare E. B. White’s classic essay “Once More to the Lake” to a short story that uses the similar theme of “bizarre thoughts” that White published in 1954, “The Second Tree from the Corner,” you can see how White distinguished in this case a true account from fiction—he wrote the story from a third-person perspective with an invented protagonist. But suppose he decided to write it in the first person using an unnamed protagonist? Most readers, I believe, would consider “Second Tree” a confessional essay. The sensibility of the central character is identical to the sensibility of White’s essayistic personae. So much fiction today is driven by first-person narration.
that it is often very difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish a short story from a personal essay by internal characteristics alone. I am often fooled into thinking that some short stories are in fact essays, and I remain obliged to those literary journals that provide me with labels, whose editors departmentalize or otherwise identify fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and drama. Left to my own devices, I would be inclined to think that any short story that can be mistaken for an essay is probably not a very good story, and vice versa.

CH: Relatedly, is the blurred line between short stories and personal essays part of the reason why publishers often push authors to recast collections of personal essays as memoirs? Do you think the response would be different for a collection of philosophical, reflective, or critical essays?

RA: I had a teacher in graduate school who was a superb essayist, Paul Fussell. He once in an interview said something to the effect (I can’t recall the exact words): “If you want to see an editor squirm, walk into his office with a collection of essays on disparate subjects.” This I believe was in the mid-1980s. Such collections have long been a tough sell—Baldwin had trouble publishing his first collection, *Notes of a Native Son*. It’s a shame this is the case, that book publishers are generally so essay-adverse, but it’s a reality, and especially so for emerging, yet unknown, personal essayists. Specialized publishers can still market collections of critical, philosophical, or scholarly articles, but when it comes to publishing a collection of separate personal essays, most editors, as I said earlier, want to see a narrative arc that unifies the essays and sets them galloping along a discernible path (e.g., dysfunction to recovery). This situation would of course change if one publisher released a collection of disparate personal/reflective essays of serious literary quality that became a blockbuster bestseller.

CH: What difference do you think it makes to recast an essay collection as a memoir?

RA: When a writer attempts to transform a collection of essays published independently into a memoir, he or she usually needs to do three things: 1. Cut extraneous material, 2. Eliminate redundancies and overlapping information, and 3. Rearrange
material so that it is less essayistic (digressive, leisurely) and more driven by a unifying narrative. Most contemporary memoirs aren’t full or formal autobiographies but rather life stories that focus on some particular chain of events or experience (surviving radiation treatment). Though I’m partial to personal essays, I’m well aware that simply having published, say, seven or eight of them doesn’t, from a publisher’s standpoint, necessarily make a viable book, even if they circle the same topic.

III. Essays in the Publishing Market

CH: Jerald, was there any strictly editorial value for you in packaging your book as a memoir versus a collection of essays? Was there any editorial drawback? Was any part of the process a learning experience for you?

JW: Packaging the book as a memoir was purely a marketing decision made by my publisher. What I learned from this process is that sometimes writers have to compromise, and that compromise isn’t necessarily a dirty word. It doesn’t always mean “to sell out.” It can also mean “collaborate.” It means that a writer’s goal to have his or her work in print has to be weighed against a publisher’s goal to make money.

CH: Bob, you’ve written that readers of creative nonfiction should “develop a keen sensitivity to the literary art of fabrication.” Is the degree of fabrication, do you think, increased when an author reworks a collection of separate essays into one continuous narrative? Is there a temptation to, as Frank Conroy said, invent scenes “for dramatic purposes”?

RA: Most definitely. Narrative can produce reasonable doubt in all sorts of areas. Take psychotherapy: Freud distrusted patients’ dreams that appeared overly coherent. He distrusted the “literary” effects behind their reports. It’s well known that patients in therapy will often try to shape their stories to give them the weight and coherence they otherwise might not have—so many incidents in our lives are fragmentary, prosaic, inconclusive. The narrative arc invites distortion, exaggeration, embellishment, deception, self-acclaim, and what I call “unearned epiphanies,” as personal stories tend to
unfold toward that fulfilling moment of “I suddenly realized.” Think what would happen if the memoirist were forbidden to use that now almost clichéd expression.

**CH:** E. J., can you briefly describe the process of recasting your essays as a memoir? How much rewriting is involved? How much do you find yourself having to add/remove?

**EJL:** I have taken it through several drafts that involved all that you describe (adding, subtraction, rewriting essays), but for the time being, I have set that project aside in favor of fiction. I found the pleasure of writing the original essays was lost in the effort to rewrite them as a memoir. Something about that effort feels forced to me and it shows in the prose. It’s straining after an effect. Then again, maybe it just needs some time to “set,” like Jell-O. I mean, I was writing about events as they were happening and may simply lack the necessary distance. So, I’ll give it six months, and read it through with fresh eyes and see how it reads.

**CH:** Jerald, what was your experience like?

**JW:** Fortunately, when I sold the manuscript, it was on the basis of ten or eleven essays, not even a fifth of what the book would be in size. Once it was decided that I was writing a memoir instead of an essay collection, I began writing essays that would fit into the narrative arc. Some of the essays that I’d already written simply didn’t fit into that arc and couldn’t be used. Others fell into place without changing a single word. And then there were the ones that had to be altered so that rather than having conclusions, they were left open-ended in a way that pointed the reader forward.

**CH:** Your book is subtitled *A Memoir of Race, Rebellion, and Redemption*—how did you land on these three themes as the central unifying core of the book?

**JW:** All three play an important role in the book, and, well, never underestimate the appeal of alliteration to publishers. Incidentally, I wanted to call the book *The Mechanics of Being* since a major theme of the book is self-creation. My publisher thought that was too Zen.
CH: What were some of your main considerations in deciding the sequence in which the essays appear in your book? How much does the final sequence reflect the order in which the essays were actually written?

JW: Once it was decided that the book would be a memoir, the essays/chapters had to tell a story in a way that’s consistent with the memoir form, which is, actually, consistent with the novel form: conflict, rising action, climax, denouement. The order of the chapters in the book isn’t faithful to the order in which they were written; many of the chapters in the beginning, for instance, were written long after some of the chapters near the end.

IV: The Reader

CH: Bob, you’ve written that “most educated readers are still uncertain about how best to evaluate a memoir or an autobiographical essay,” which may result from the few critical studies that exist about the art of memoir relative to the art of fiction. Do readers and publishers push writers into certain literary forms primarily because of the comfort of familiarity?

RA: A lot of writers discover their genre slowly, by trial and error. Things may be changing, but I doubt many ambitious writers start out by thinking “I want to be an essayist.” Many are still motivated by the lure of the novel and its supreme position in today’s hierarchy of literary forms. Novelists and poets are still sexier than essayists, despite Lena Dunham’s admirable (to me) efforts to spice up the essay on “Girls.”

There’s really not a whole lot of critical guidance for readers of literary nonfiction. In my opinion, MFA programs don’t do enough instruction on the evaluation of nonfiction and essays, and in graduate fields, I don’t see sufficient attention to the aesthetics of nonfiction. This is slowly coming around as more programs now offer nonfiction courses but most reviews of nonfiction books are still heavily into the book’s content. Essentially, the criticism of essays and nonfiction has not yet caught up with that of fiction and poetry, mainly because these are still considered more imaginative.
CH: Jerald, have readers ever told you that your story might not have been as resonant if packaged as an essay collection? How important do you think the designation is in a consumer’s decision to buy or read your book, all other things being equal? What has been your general impression of your publisher’s approach to marketing your book, and of the sales it has enjoyed since publication?

JW: Interesting questions. No, I haven’t had any readers say that an essay collection would have resonated more. Ultimately, as in all forms of commerce, the literary market is driven by consumer demand. If readers demand essay collections instead of memoirs, publishers would encourage memoirists to turn their chapters into essays, and *memoir* would be the shunned word that *essay* has become. I’m happy with the way the book turned out and I can’t complain about the sales. My publisher did a great job.

CH: Do you think readers can appreciate any of the pieces in the book on their own, out of context—or does the book’s current structure necessitate reading through from beginning to end?

JW: Pretty much each piece can be read on its own, out of context. In fact, many of the chapters have appeared in various magazines and anthologies as essays.

CH: E. J., in your own writing, what made you decide to write the story of your life in essays, as opposed to a traditional memoir? How important do you think the designation is in a consumer’s decision to buy or read your book?

EJL: Honestly, I write essays when they occur to me. They’re a nice break from fiction. I only thought to collect them into a narrative-length book when one of mine was reprinted in *Best American Essays* and I realized that its food theme might serve as a through-line for a collection of food-related essays, a memoir in meals.

CH: Marcia, in “The Essayist’s Dilemma,” you note that readers “might be surprised at how often essayists have been urged to reshape their material as memoir.” This
is a chicken-and-egg question. Do you think publishers reshape collections as memoirs because that’s what readers prefer, or do readers gravitate toward memoir because that’s what publishers publish?

MA: I believe that publishers find it easier to market memoir. The conventional wisdom suggests it is easier to blurb a memoir, to write copy for a memoir, to find a hook for a memoir, and therefore easier for readers to figure out what the book is about. If a book seems ambiguous or too diffuse, it may not appeal to as many readers.

Readers think they know what a memoir is. And whether they are right or wrong in their expectations, they feel confident they know what they are getting. The success of memoir in the last twenty years or more begets more success, more popularity. Memoir builds on memoir. I don’t think there’s any buzz or excitement about a collection of essays, nor do I think a reader knows what to expect. A collection of essays operates as a kind of mystery object, contents unknown. Many of my students will spontaneously say, “I love memoir.” I have never heard a student say that about essays. Why? Well, I would say that the publicity around memoir has been more successful than the publicity around essay.

V: Where does Essay Publishing go from here?

CH: Bob, when you write that there was a greater tolerance for essayistic playfulness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when “nonfiction was genuinely creative,” are you implying that the essay will continue to be under-appreciated in the twenty-first century?

RA: The essay as a literary genre can only be fully appreciated if it is considered as a form of imaginative literature, a genre equivalent to fiction, poetry, and drama. But the word imaginative doesn’t necessarily mean that something cannot be factual or historically accurate, as though to write imaginative nonfiction means distorting or inventing facts. The imagination is at play in all sorts of ways, in shaping a form, in metaphoric patterns, in the interplay of voices, in the creative resistance to one’s own style and structure. Lately, there’s been, in my opinion, too much emphasis on “objective truth” in creative nonfiction and not enough on how the writer’s imagination plays a key role in the overall process of writing any
nonfiction, personal, polemic, or informational. I like to tell students that the key syllable of information is form.

**CH:** What is your impression of the changing needs and habits of the general reading population? What trends do you see coming in the twenty-first century? Does the growing influence of technology have a bearing on the public’s appetite for short-form essays? How much influence do you think the sales and marketing arms of trade publishers will continue to have on how an author’s work is packaged?

**JW:** I think the reading public’s obsession with memoirs will continue, and publishers will continue to respond by encouraging young writers to write them, which means essayists will have to continue to fight for attention. But that’s a fight worth having.

**EJL:** It seems to me that we’re an increasingly visual culture, so while I trust that prose is with us to stay, I do think the form in which we engage it will continue to change—that as writers our work will increasingly need to engage the cultural terms of the twenty-first century, rather than aping those of the sixteenth or nineteenth centuries. That said, I do think the essay is kind of an ideal form for our age, offering the “thought-bite,” as it were. Brief, idiosyncratic. And I think the popularity of blogs affirms our interest in seeing how another mind moves over a subject, and suggests that new technology may in fact support—rather than limit—our engagement with the form. In general, I’m thrilled that I can get an obscure Hazlitt essay online pretty much instantaneously. It’s wonderful. And as the web continues to undermine the role of publishers as gatekeepers of culture, I think we have the potential for a richer literary culture as a result.

**MA:** I imagine the present trends will continue. Publicity, whether you have it or don’t, plays an enormous role in whether a book is reviewed, made visible, sells, or disappears with a tiny splash. Most writers don’t have a publicity machine behind them. Even writers with books from major publishing houses now hire an additional publicity team. A writer without that apparatus simply can’t compete.
I don’t have a position worked out about the growing trend of publishing online. I do think books will be read less because people are spending so much more time reading and writing blogs, and other social media. There are only so many hours in a day and if you are spending two hours writing on Facebook, tweeting, reading blogs, answering email, and managing your sprawling empire of words online, there isn’t much left over for actual books. Surely the book as we know it is disappearing.

**RA:** Over a half-century ago, E. B. White wondered if the popularity of audio-visual aids in our schools would dramatically affect reading. The literary arts for centuries have creatively absorbed every technological innovation, and so I see optimistically only a state of perpetual literary renewal. I do think, however, students today are less well-read than those of my generation and possess less literary and historical background, but on the other hand they are at the same time strangely more open and sophisticated. I won’t be around to compile it, but I often wonder what *The Best American Essays 2050* will look like.
On Syntax

Jill Talbot

When I read an essay, I linger on the first sentence—sure that all I need to know is there. And when I finish reading that essay, I immediately flip back (or scroll up) and read that sentence again with what I have come to know.

“Suppose I were to begin by saying that I had fallen in love with a color.”

Thus begins Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*. It’s a sentence with a first word that foregrounds supposition and speculation as Nelson thinks throughout the text, beginning many segments with words such as “Imagine,” “Perhaps,” “Then Again,” or “On the other hand.” She also introduces the “you,” a haunting presence of absence in the text. “Fallen in love” foreshadows not only the fascination with the “color” but also hints at the lover that’s been lost.

Another:

“I loved the restaurant’s name, a compact curve of a word.”

Bernard Cooper’s first sentence in “Burl’s” introduces the restaurant, a location that creates Cooper’s oft-used bracketing structure, as the essay begins and ends at the restaurant. “Name” evokes the implications of what we call things, a central question of the essay. Finally, the “curve of a word” works on two levels: first, Bernard’s encounter with gender-bending curves his perspective of sexual distinction, and second, Cooper struggles, as a young boy, to find a word for what he had seen. *Burls*, he decides years later, perfectly combines *boys* and *girls*. Given that, no wonder Bernard Cooper “loved the restaurant’s name.”

Along with that first sentence, or what I call “the place of privilege” in the essay, I read the final sentence. As I tell my students, when you complete a draft, go back and read your first and your final sentences. The entire essay should be there. I should interject something else I tell my students all the time: *There are no absolutes in writing*. So while *most* essays embody this concept, not all do. But to give you an example, here are the first and final lines of Dagoberto Gilb’s “Northeast Direct”: 
“I’m on board Amtrak’s number 175 to Penn Station.”

And so as I begin a ride up the escalator toward the taxi lines, I watch him go straight ahead, both of us covered with anonymity like New England snow.”

During the span of the essay, Gilb notices another passenger on the train who has *his* book, and he watches him begin to read and at one point, Gilb comes oh-so-close to letting the passenger know he’s the author. So the train ride, the two strangers, the ironic distance between reader and writer—that’s the essay.

This first and final sentence read is not intended to reduce any essay’s power and or detract from the complexity that happens between these lines. The point is that we must pay attention to our beginnings and endings as writers, because while the reader doesn’t know where we’re headed, we better.

Moving beyond the opening and closing, I scan the essay for syntactical patterns. It’s like looking at only the shadows in a Hopper painting—where are they and what do they do? So it goes when I read essays—I look for the shadows in the syntax. Does the writer employ dashes? Are they throughout each paragraph (introducing distance or hesitation, perhaps?) or only twice in the entire essay (emphasis?). Are there parentheticals? Questions? Colons? Fragments? Does the writer rely on repetition?

I think of Meg Rains’s “The Memory of My Disappearance,”3 which includes seven segments. The first, fourth, and seventh segments begin with the phrase, “The last time I saw my Mother.” On a structural level, the syntactical refrain provides scaffolding for the essay. But at the level of meaning, the repetition shades in a mystery, as Rains cannot locate the disappearance in a single moment, so she remembers (does she?) more than one.

Still, when I read certain essayists, it’s clear from the first line to the final one that the art is in their sentences—all of them.
Syntax in the Canon

In the first sentence of *The Writing Life*, Annie Dillard tells us this: “When you write, you lay out a line of words.” For some essayists, the lines of words they lay out are done in such a way that can only be their own. In this way, they are more than essayists. They are syntacticians.

The syntactical styling of select contemporary essayists offer inventive and evocative models that allow us to consider *how* we write *what* we write. As prologue, I will point to a few canonical essayists with a penchant for particular stylistic elements.

To begin, Montaigne relied heavily on semi-colons, interrogations, and intertextuality:

Pleasure is a quality of very little ambition; it thinks itself rich enough of itself without any addition of repute; and is best pleased where most retired. A young man should be whipped who pretends to a taste in wine and sauces; there was nothing which, at that age, I less valued or knew: now I begin to learn; I am very much ashamed on’t; but what should I do? I am more ashamed and vexed at the occasions that put me upon’t. ’Tis for us to dote and trifle away the time, and for young men to stand upon their reputation and nice punctilios; they are going towards the world and the world’s opinion; we are retiring from it:—

“Let them reserve to themselves arms, horses, spears, clubs, tennis, swimming, and races; and of many sports leave to us old men cards and dice;”

Next, Charles Lamb, who preferred the parenthetical, the dash, and italics:

“Innumerable are the ways which they take to insult and worm you out of their husband’s confidence. Laughing at all you say with a
kind of wonder, as if you were a queer kind of fellow that said good things, but an oddity, is one of the ways;—they have a particular kind of stare for the purpose;—till at last the husband, who used to defer to your judgment, and would pass over some excrescences of understanding and manner for the sake of a general vein of observation (not quite vulgar) which he perceived in you, begins to suspect whether you are not altogether a humorist,—a fellow well enough to have consorted with in his bachelor days, but not quite so proper to be introduced to ladies.”

Virginia Woolf, fluent in subordination, lyrical, adverbial, and serial constructions:

That is true: to escape is the greatest of pleasures; street haunting in winter the greatest of adventures. Still as we approach our own doorstep again, it is comforting to feel the old possessions, the old prejudices, fold us round; and the self, which has been blown about at so many street corners, which has battered like a moth at the flame of so many inaccessible lanterns, sheltered and enclosed. Here again is the usual door; here the chair turned as we left it and the china bowl and the brown ring on the carpet. And here—let us examine it tenderly, let us touch it with reverence—is the only spoil we have retrieved from all the treasures of the city, a lead pencil.

James Baldwin, another essayist enamored with subordination:

“When I was around nine or ten I wrote a play which was directed by a young, white schoolteacher, a woman, who then took an interest in me, and gave me books to read, and, in order to corroborate my theatrical bent, decided to take me to see what she somewhat tactlessly referred to as ‘real’ plays.”
Joan Didion’s repetition of words and phrases:

“Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind. The picture dictates the arrangement. The picture dictates whether this will be a sentence with or without clauses, a sentence that ends hard or a dying-fall sentence, long or short, active or passive. The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what’s on in the picture.”

And those Truman Capote dashes:

“Until one morning in mid-November of 1959, few Americans—in fact, few Kansans—had ever heard of Holcomb.

No, it was done for the same reason the mattress box was spread on the floor—to make the victim more comfortable.”

“Mr. Clutter in a navy-blue flannel, his wife in navy-blue crepe; and—and it was this, especially, that lent the scene an awful aura—the head of each was completely encased in cotton.”

Severed Lines

One of my favorite syntactically charged essays is Steven Church’s “Thirty Minutes to the End.” This imagined essay—a direct address to Church’s Aunt Judy during the tornado that destroyed Greensburg, Kansas on May 4, 2007—begins at 9:15 p.m., thirty minutes before the tornado’s impact. From there, it counts down in five-minute increments (9:20, 9:15, 9:10) to the moments after.
That’s the essay structurally, but syntactically, Church recreates the frenetic feel of the tornado via the use of fragments.


At “Twenty Minutes,” Church relegates his use of the abbreviated sentence to hearsay, the fragmentary facts: “Telling you things. F5 they say. A massive tornado. Over a mile wide.”

In “Fifteen Minutes,” the fragments turn to threat: “Like a freight train.” They also return to “this house”: “His name. His chair.” “Your own children. Indiana, Kansas, Chile.” This last one, a series of locations, scatters a family and echoes the way objects during a storm are far-flung, divided from their source.

At “Ten Minutes,” Church pares down to three fragments (the calm before the storm?): “Crumbled. Blown to bits.” “An image and a metaphor.”

The next section, “Five Minutes,” includes the most fragments of any segment in the essay (to the eerie count of thirteen). [I have used quotation marks to separate the instances of the fragments, which are spread throughout the segment.] “Now.” “Ting. Creak.” “Smacks your house.” “Like a train wreck in the dark. Glass breaking. Chink-chinking.” “Spinning. Drifting off.” “The plan. The grand plan.” “No rhyme, order, morality.” “Ever.”

And now we’re at “Zero Minutes,” when Church offers “The drain.” “Anything. A light, a voice.” He follows with four other fragments, and the final one reads, “Stricken and pale.”

The fragments in the final section, “The End,” come early, after the first two sentences: “Wandering east along Highway 54. Away from town.” “Dazed. Wandering in disbelief.” And they pick up again mid-segment: “Grandparents gone. The old and the young dying.” This final fragment in the essay concludes “this house of stories.” So in the eight sections of this essay, from thirty minutes to
the aftermath—the fragment count reads 4/7/4/5/3/13/7/6—from inconsistency to destruction to decline.

Some synonyms of fragments: bits, chunks, particles, pieces, remnants, scraps, shreds, leftovers, shards, and tatters. In other words, what a tornado creates, what it leaves, so in the essay’s fragment progression and denouement, Church recreates the tornado syntactically. The fragments alone tell the story—the imagined experience—but the essay as a whole is an engrossing experience made more so because of them.

One more syntactical intrigue in this essay includes Church’s specific use of the dash, which only appears in the first and final sections as accompaniments to “the first-person I,” which he explains as showing up only briefly in the beginning and again at then end, “to [show his distance] from the events but also [his] intimacy with both [his] aunt and the place.”

From the first section:

“Not yet. Not tonight. Now it is something much worse—but you cannot know these things yet, have not seen the picture I’ve seen splashed in the days after.”

And from the final one:

“You cannot know now how I will imagine all of this tornado, this apocalypse, this story—every detail, every image of you—as a way to stretch my voice out and let it rise and quiver from the severed lines, hovering nearby as something familiar and safe here at the end.”

The phrase, “severed lines,” is brilliant in consideration of this essay’s fragmentation. Also, look at the way that final sentence elongates, stretches (the dash as connection more than separation), as do the ones which precede it, so that the storm has truly subsided, the quietude of suspension re-established. The syntax, as it were, intact.

**Syntax as Palette**

In “Word Hoards: On Diction and the Riches of the English Language,” Eric LeMay encourages writers to “be aware of [our]
words as words,” in his informative, illuminating overview of American English’s “wordy mix” of Latinate (excitement, illusion, inanimate) and Germanic (thrill, trick, dead) by pointing out the ways in which we can blend Latinate (urgency) and Germanic (edge) words: “You can paint with them or mix them to make other colors.” Such experiments create tone and texture, movement and suspension.

When I read LeMay’s analogy, I wondered about my own sentences, about the ways in which I conscientiously paint and mix. Two sentences from one of my essays, “Wine List,” came to mind:

“Years later, I’ll walk by this moment, see the two of us and the glints of more-than-gold in glasses. Hints of agony inside a stilling wind.”

I rely on the Germanic in the first sentence to accentuate the pang of a sharp memory, but I want to make a move, and not a sudden one, because the tone of this essay is wistful, so its sentences need to reflect that. I need to ease into the ache, the fragment that follows, and to do this I blend three monosyllabic words to invent my own Latinate (more-than-gold). I’m pouring all of these words toward one—“agony”—so I need it stand out, and to do that, I carry all of those “s”s over from the first sentence to “hints” and then pick it back up again with “inside” and “stilling” so that “agony” is framed (enveloped) by sibilance (hiss).

“The writing,” LeMay insists, “has to be as rich as the words from which it’s made.” When an essayist fails to consider the words, the words often have a cacophonous conversation the essayist never intended. And it’s distracting. But when an essayist is aware of his words as words, we delight in the cadence, the complexity, and the composition.

To press LeMay’s painting analogy, think about Mark Rothko’s multiforms, those blocks of opposing, yet complementary colors (yellows and reds, blues and greens). The energy and urgency and intimacy of those paintings derive from the contrast and complement of colors. Rothko took primary colors and put them into conversations, and as LeMay notes, “some words have better conversations than others.” What are your words saying?
In his 1956 essay, “Music, Language, and Composition,” Teodor W. Adorno addresses the interplay between musical and linguistic forms:

“Music resembles language in the sense that it is a temporal sequence of articulated sounds which are more than just sounds . . . . The resemblance to language extends from the whole work, the organized linking of significant sounds, right down to the single sound, the note as the threshold of merest presence, the pure vehicle of expression. The analogy goes beyond the organized connection of sounds and extends materially to the structures. The traditional theory of form employs such terms as sentence, phrase, segment, ways of punctuating—question, exclamation and parenthesis. Subordinate phrases are ubiquitous, voices rise and fall, and all these terms of musical gesture are derived from speech.”

Adorno conflates the forms so that it’s difficult, at times, to discern which is which, until he shifts to the concept of interpretation: “To interpret language means: to understand language. To interpret music means: to make music.” But what happens when the essayist interprets language as music?

*Seneca Review* has become synonymous with the lyric essay, a subgenre of the personal essay Deborah Tall and John D’Agata describe as “[giving] primacy to artfulness over the conveying of information. They forsake narrative line, discursive logic, and the art of persuasion in favor of idiosyncratic meditation. The lyric essay partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language.” (my emphasis) The lyric asks us to listen to the language, both decorous and discordant, being made.

Here’s an excerpt from the middle of Lia Purpura’s “Augury,” an essay on the occasion of finding a goldfinch, hanging limp, dead, from a tree:
“But yellow gets to be glorious, too. And its brightness not wholly awful. Such a yellow scours sight, fattens it. It is uncorruptedly lemon-like. And the sharp bolt of black on the wing shines like a whip of licorice. At the end of the path and around the bend, here’s the coming-upon again. The moment itself doesn’t close down. Its brightness is not slamming a door. Yellow’s not trying to make up for the end.

Time crests there.

The weather patterns. Fish in the lake. Dogs by the shore with laughing kids.

Why must a last moment be made so visible? And held aloft! Why must it dangle, and shift so softly, and keep on making a finality? From it, light rises. On it light settles. Slippery as tallow. Shushing in the breeze.

I think it’s good to stand beneath a thing that means to take words away.”

Through the use of rhyme (bend, again), simile (like a whip of licorice), consonance and assonance (wholly awful), and imagist fragments (Fish in the lake.), Purpura’s syntax soars. I get lost in this section of the essay because it is a digression, but not one of thought. Her conclusion to this yellow-inspired suffusion evokes irony, for the bird has not taken words away from her, it has taken them away, as if in fantastical flight. Time crests there.

I’m no Adorno, but I have always suspected a connection between musical ability and writing aptitude. “We turn to the lyric essay,” Deborah Tall and John D’Agata describe, “with its malleability, ingenuity, immediacy, complexity, and use of poetic language—to give us a fresh way to make music of the world.” As it turns out, many lyric essayists were making music in the world before they ever turned to the essay to make music of it.

Purpura writes: “Yes, absolutely there’s a connection between a musical life and a writing life.” A former musician, she played oboe for years and notes, “there’s nothing like that controlled column of air moving through the body, ending in sound and song.”
When I read that statement in the context of her prose, I automatically replace “body” with “sentence.”

Another lyric essayist, Ander Monson, creates syntactical synergy in “Letter to a Future Lover”21:

“You know, your lovers surely number more than mine; that’s fine, but when I fall, it’s ditch-witch hitting electric line, the whole world alive and lit in amperes for a moment. It might be gone again a nanosecond later, the body aching with or for or from the jolt; and perhaps it’s fever-dream; and who cares where it comes from as long as it’s fast and seems like it might last until we’re rusting into dust.”

We fall into the language, follow the long “i” to the short “i,” the quick bursts of “m”s and “n”s before the “f”s filter to the final resounding measure of short “a”s and “u”s. It’s a fun ride (read). As it turns out, Monson played piano and guitar, though not particularly well, he claims22. Most of his musical training was in the bassoon, which he played for seven years. He also sang in choirs, small ensembles, and jazz groups. No wonder there’s such wonder in his work.

Another lyric essayist, Brian Oliu, creates his unique syntax on two levels. First, he infuses his lyricism with declarative sentences, repetition, and subordination. On another, no less important level, punctuation, Oliu alternates between the dash and the colon. Here’s an excerpt from “Boss Battle: The Final Boss”23:

“When I arrived, the music changed, and then it went silent—nothing of note except for the ringing in my ears, the residue of the clinking of a glass, the dropped phone call, the silence of a house in the morning. There is nothing romantic about the idea of final when final arrives like this: not with an arrow in the eye, not with a body losing grip on the floor and disappearing in the dark with a sparkle and a wink, not with a final blink after turning magenta, a red not found in nature, a red not found in your
face, not even while choking, not even while gasping for breath. What you have imagined the final stage to be is not what it is—here is a list it is not. It is not surrounded by family and handwritten cards from friends, fresh flowers replacing dead flowers, no, never dead flowers, get them out of here, cast them into the street, put them in another room, the water will not save you. It is not done loudly, a body on fire, a spine crushed, speed meeting its opposite, the flavor of tin on the tongue, a lost tooth.”

Oliu, who more often than not employs the second-person in his writing, doesn’t play any instruments, but he does deejay, so I can’t help but glean a connection between his ability to spin songs, to intuit tones and rhythms, and to evoke a crowd’s participation the way he does a reader’s.

A prolific lyric essayist, Brenda Miller, admits:

“I’ve never been a musical person (or at least I was told I had no “ear” for music from a young age), but just this past year I started taking voice lessons for the first time, just for fun. It’s been a transformative experience! And there are so many connections to writing that I’m just now beginning to articulate in my own mind. For instance, my teacher taught me early on that you can’t sing a note by listening to it with your ear or your brain; you have to feel the note in your body. By the time you’re listening to it, it’s already gone.”

One of my favorite syntactical maneuvers appears in Miller’s essay, “Swerve,” which consists of only two-hundred-and-ninety words and two paragraphs. The second paragraph is one sentence:

“I’m sorry, I said, and I said it again, and we continued on our way through the desert, in the dark of night, with the contraband you had put in our trunk, with the brake light you hadn’t fixed blinking on and off,
me driving because you were too drunk, or too tired, or too depressed, and we traveled for miles into our future, where eventually I would apologize for the eggs being overcooked, and for the price of light bulbs, and for the way the sun blared through our trailer windows and made everything too bright, and I would apologize when I had the music on and when I had it off, I’d say sorry for being in the bathroom, and sorry for crying, and sorry for laughing, I would apologize, finally, for simply being alive, and even now I’m sorry I didn’t swerve, I didn’t get out of the way.”

I admire this sentence for a few reasons, and the first is in the way in which Miller employs what I call “the magic three.” Think of the five paragraph essay we all learn early in our writing education—the one that includes three body paragraphs as a means to develop and support a thesis. When I teach composition, I tell my students that the number three may be employed at the paragraph level as well, so that a general statement (topic sentence) may be supported by three examples.

In the creative writing classroom, I call it “the magic three,” because it can be used in various and magical ways. In Miller’s sentence, she relies on this syntactical device first in “too drunk, or too tired, or too depressed.” Then, she uses it again, but in a different way, with: “I would apologize for the eggs being overcooked, and for the price of light bulbs, and for the way the sun blared through our trailer windows and made everything too bright.” Miller echoes the composition principle of using specific examples to elucidate a general idea—the apology—with three examples, but here the “magic three” is one of progression, from within her control to beyond her control. She’s in control of cooking the eggs, but the price of light bulbs is not within her control, and certainly not the brightness of the sun, and I can’t help but read a progression of light here, too, in the (implied) yellow light of eggs to light bulbs to the blare of the sun so that we’re all squinting by the end of the sentence. The final syntactical decision I admire is the way Miller continues those clauses to the very end. For example, what would change if she had used a period instead of that final comma?
“Even now I’m sorry I didn’t swerve. I didn’t get out of the way.”

The syntax matches the content—for she didn’t get out of the way—and if she had chosen the end-stop of the period there, she would have syntactically gotten out of the way, but in her usage and perpetuation of the comma, she makes the “I” implicit in the inaction. The period would be a swerve, a move antithetical to everything that has preceded it.

To me, “Swerve” is even more fascinating when viewed through the lens of the first word(s) of each sentence:

“I’m sorry. A pound. Thunk. Your. That’s when. And I’m I’m sorry.”

The restraint in “Swerve” can be illuminated by comparing it to the syntactical selections of another essay, “There Are Distances Between Us,” by Roxane Gay. Unlike the extreme brevity of Miller, Gay’s essay comes in at seven hundred words, still a flash, but more than twice as long as Miller’s. Still, the measure of their difference is not in their word count but in their syntax. Here are the first word(s) of Gay’s essay:

The interstate. There are. You are. We are. I have. There are. When I was young. I traced. I once. That summer. Before. My hair. I stayed. My parents. A change. I went. Each time. It was. I never. I only. When. The wallpaper. There was. I loved. Whenever. My brothers and I. He often. He said. Every morning. I think. It shocks. I do not. Those words. They shouldn’t. In a photo. We are. I have. My father. My brother and I. My father. He is. When he speaks. I have. My father. He is. He has. I’ve. The ingratitude. I do. We could. We could.

If we look at the initial two hundred and ninety words of Gay’s essay, we count twenty-one sentences to Miller’s seven, which results in a 3:1 ratio. This makes Dillard’s idea of “laying down words in a line,” seem simplistic (1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Words, sentences, and fragments—they’re all variables that may be formulated differently by each writer, in every essay, into infinite syntactical equations.
Gay’s paratactic prose has been lauded by critics as “simple and direct,” “direct, bracing and propulsive,” and having a “plainspoken, almost affectless style.” A few years ago, I had the opportunity to ask Gay about her syntactical sparseness. Here’s how she described her prose:

“I developed [my voice] by trying, in my stories and essays, to focus on intense moments or situations or ideas and allowing that intensity to be revealed through stripped down prose. Let the story do its own work rather than trying to insert myself too much . . . . I prefer that when people read my work, they simply see what is being written.”

This section has built on Adorno’s theoretical considerations of the similarities and differences between music and language and particularly how those connections may be read in the context of the lyrical essayist, but within my considerations, I have included a writer who uses straightforward, stripped-down prose as a method of contrast. Yet musicality still applies. Consider a waltz. Roxane Gay’s sentences imitate an almost-unwavering waltz, as she puts the stress (the subject) as the first beat of nearly every line.

**Dancers Extraordinaire: Dinah Lenney and David Lazar**

Have you seen Donald O’Connor’s comedic, acrobatic “Make ‘em Laugh” number from *Singin’ in the Rain*? His flimsy, whimsical hat, the way he dances on his knees, leaps, falls and trips and dips and tangles, the way he interrupts his singing to play musical faces, how he play-fights a prop and does a backflip after running up a wall, not once, but twice? It’s a marvel, the kind of performance I watch in awe, wondering, “How does he do all of that? And how does he make it look so instinctual?”

Essayist Dinah Lenney accomplishes such feats through syntactical acrobatics in her consistent use of five elements: italics, dashes, parentheticals, questions, and dialogue. You can look at the opening paragraph of any of her essays and recognize these elements, sometimes all of them, but more often a couple of them, though
her moves are never formulaic or predictable. Each paragraph is a combination of unexpected steps that sweep us through the dance of her syntax.

From her essay, “Parade”:

“Now this here, this is a dream: We forgot to get married and we never had children—we never got around to any of it. And now, in the dream, he’s had it with me, he’s leaving, he says. In the dream, I’m 30, 35, 40, 45, 50... That is, I’m as old as I am. The dream is recurring, but different from the others, the ones in which I’m barefoot and trudging uphill or wading through water with all my belongings balanced on my head like a picture in National Geographic. This dream, unlike those, is so real, which is maybe why I’m not able to wake myself up. In this dream, he’s my very last chance at a real life—he is my real life—and he’s walking away. In this dream—though I’ve shrugged him off a half a dozen times during the day—though I’ve been snippy and critical and rude (maybe because I’ve been all those things), though I’ve thought more than once I’d just as soon live by myself—that way the counters would stay clean and I could be as selfish I am—it’s Fred who decides he can’t take anymore. In the dream, as in life, he is even and rational and kind. He’s not changing his mind. It just isn’t worth it, he tells me. But, I wail, we forgot to get married. Can’t we get married? Can’t we have a couple of kids? Weren’t we supposed to have a couple of kids, please? In real life, he saves me then. ‘Dinah, wake up,’ he says, touching my shoulder. And I do.”

If you stand back and watch her prose, look at it visually, you can see the performance of it (as well as the Charles Lamb echoes.) Lenney’s voice moves at a frenetic pace. It’s stream-of-consciousness paired with a conversational intimacy, a persona who questions her self (and us). Another syntactical element of her work? She answers,
at least for herself, with intermittent, fragmentary declarations. In
the paragraph above, she closes with (“And I do.”). A few examples
from other essays—“Me neither.” “As if.” “But I do.”—each one
letting the reader know where, exactly, she stands.

If Dinah Lenny is Donald O’Connor, David Lazar is Fred
Astaire. If you’ve read Lazar—in essays, in interviews, or in person—
you’ll immediately recognize the seamlessness of that connection.
In his essay, “Death, Death, Death, Death, Death,” Lazar writes,
“For me, charm is the quintessence of wit brought to bear to amuse
and delight another in our presence. It allows us to think, most
briefly, that we exist with a kind of fluidly amusing grace that can be
shared . . . . That’s one of the reasons Fred Astaire’s death hit me so
hard. The death of charm makes the ground tremble.” Lazar’s syntax
is at once fluid, lyrical, interrogatory, hypotactic, parenthetical,
conversational, and intellectual.

Here’s a passage from “Across the River”:

“I think this (a)moral seasoning dogged me for years,
bogged me down until I realized—I can locate this
precisely as having occurred somewhere between
the ages of twenty and thirty—that I performed best
on all occasions when I stuck to the rules, played
it fair instead of loose. To cast glibness aside, the
point is that I was trained to think that in the city,
your wits should lead you to victory, to getting what
you want and need, that savvy slight dishonesty was
what you cleverly used or were trumped by. How
disheartening, dispiriting, and (I sense one more
coming) disillusioning to realize that my skill in
almost all cases resided in the reasonably honest use
of intellect, emotion, and language. In short, I think I
was duped into thinking I could dupe. What a rube;
how city-humiliating to be so self-trumped.”

Here the duality of the parenthetical is followed by the rhyme of
dogged/bogged before the dash of a clarifying aside precedes the
slant rhyme of rules/loose. Lazar carries the sibilance to the next
sentence with “cast glibness aside” and extends the short “i” in
glibness to “city,” “wits,” and the first syllabus of “victory.” Next, he picks up the “s” again with the alliteration-cum-consonance, “savvy slight dishonestly.” In his recurring use of serial constructions, he enjoys repeating the prefix with variation. Here, he uses disheartening, dispiriting, and disillusioning. Another example of this variation-on-a-theme appears in “The City Always Speaks”: “In the late afternoons in cities, the captive and the captured are joined in their capitulations to form.” (my emphasis) But back to the paragraph at hand, which continues with the s-s-s-s-ing in “skill in almost all cases resided in the reasonably honest use,” before the word play and rhyme of duped/dupe and rube. Wait, he’s not finished. He’s calling back that short “i” (city-humiliating) and those s sounds (city, so, self), before turning on a word used earlier in the paragraph: “trumped.”

All those “s”s evoke the hissing of a crowded city—the p-shhhh of bus doors, the air brake-release of delivery trucks, car wheels in the rain, and in the midst of these clever, compounded coordinates Lazar casts a comic aside, just to remind us he’s here with us, aware of his own syntactical, serial predilections with “(I sense one more coming).”

In “The Usable Past of M.F.K. Fisher,” Lazar describes his own prose as inhabiting an “excessively elaborating style, which depends on strings of dependent clauses, constant qualification, elaborate digression, and well, you get the picture.” These elaborate digressions, more often than not, occur within the frame of what I call the “Lazarian Parenthetical,” and to prove how much Lazar employs it, I have counted one-hundred-and-fifty-eight of them within the two-hundred-and-fifteen pages of Occasional Desire. However, they’re not all used for the same purposes and not always asides or wink-winks to the reader—this is what makes them, in my mind, Lazarian. For example, some of them are anecdotal:

“(I once had a woman wrestle the phone out of my hand in frustration, once had a man fix me with a look and imperiously command me to “Say good-bye”).”
“(When I am offered something to drink in an unfamiliar setting, be it morning or midnight, I always accept, wanting to appear game.)”

Many, inquiry:
“(Shouldn’t the appearance of the unrepressed be a sister concept to the return of the repressed?)”
“(Is my memory thawing or cooling into intellectualism?)”

“(Do we demystify our own work uselessly when we try to peg it and create self-conscious themes, make the perfectly implicit, the obsessively understated, too obvious?)”

And because Lazar is an aficionado of both literature and film, some of them include allusion or intertextuality:
“(Do I dare to eat a peach?)”
“(E. B. White, hold on tight.)”
“(think of the end of “On Some Verses of Virgil”)”
“(good fences make good mentors?)”
“(which makes the whole thing sound more madcap than it was, as though I was some Max Sennett character crashing through the window of a sushi bar)"
“(was Hitchcock’s The Birds, with its wounded and wounding avengers, flying this same idea?)”

Still, some are conversant:
“(Rachel, here’s my list of essay descriptions, fond as I am of d’s: desire, disruption, discovery, dyspepsia . . . dereliction, Daedalian, doubt, DuPlessian . . .)”
“(I don’t like suspense in essays. It didn’t.)”
“(hold your letters—we’ve read the same books, all gone to therapy.)”

More often than not, though, the Lazarian Parenthetical is a blend: allusion and interrogation, intertextual conversation, even meta-interrogations of self and genre.

In an attempt to explain his fascination with the parenthetical (how essayistic of him), Lazar muses, “I wish I could completely explain my love of parentheses (if I could though perhaps they’d be taken over by mere hyphens, and lose their lovely enclosed space,
their digressive antechamber next to, or in the middle of a sentence, a thought).” And while he does employ the dash sparingly—again, look at the prose visually—the parenthetical is the most recognizable punctuation mark in David Lazar’s essays, and they are uniquely his own. In fact, they are charming.

While Lazar’s syntax clearly embodies the influence of classical essayists Michel de Montaigne and Charles Lamb, it’s difficult to ignore the Astaire influence, both in Lazar’s persona and in his style. Lazar grew up watching Astaire’s films “over and over.” And in the paragraph below, he catalogues Astaire’s attributes. The italics are mine . . .

“Astaire, in addition to changing the nature of dance itself in the twentieth century, *fusing high and low, the serious and the whimsical, embodied a grace, sometimes lyrical, sometimes narrative, in his work* (achieved through hours and hours of really meticulous rehearsal) that no one else had or has managed to combine.”

. . . because, as he would write: David Lazar, anyone?

**Applause: Last Lines**

The last line of essays suspend rather than end. Think about that second when the final movement of a symphony either dissolves into quiet or crescendos its coda and everyone in the performance hall is stilled by a silence that is no silence at all but reverberation, resuscitation, resplendence. Musicians, conductor, audience—all held by this impossible pose of delay like a diver at the height of her jump before the rush and riot of her twists and descent. And then, the splash, the applause, the standing ovations and bows and ladder climb from the pool to the deck dripping with the marvel of the music.

When I am reading an essay infused with lyrical, lilting, and elongated syntax, I get lost in the wonder, the wander through the language as if I’ve stepped through the door of an unfamiliar house, and I move from room to room, not understanding how I got
there or why this room opens to this other one, and I forget to worry where I am or where the door is that will lead me out. But then I turn the page and see it there, the final sentence.

I put my hand over the words, not wanting to leave.
And then I surrender.

(Sources)


4 While these examples do not convey the complexity and variety of these essayists’ writing as a whole, they do serve to establish that some writers do, in fact, create a recognizable syntax.

5 “On Some Verses of Virgil”

6 “On A Bachelor’s Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People”

7 She most often serialized in threes. In this sentence, it’s the chair, the china bowl, and the brown ring.

8 “Street Haunting: A London Adventure”

9 In a 1963 review of *The Fire Next Time*, the essay collection that followed *Notes on a Native Son*, *The New York Review of Books* noted, “He is in love [ . . . ] with syntax, with sentences that mount through clearly articulated stages to a resounding and clarifying climax and then gracefully subside.”

10 “Notes on a Native Son”

11 “Why I Write”
12 *In Cold Blood.*


14 From Church’s meta-essay which follows “Thirty Minutes” in the anthology.


16 *PANK* (Spring 2014): 127-130.


18 Both quotes included in this section by Tall and D’Agata can be found in “The Lyric Essay.” *Seneca Review:* http://www.hws.edu/academics/senecareview/lyricessay.aspx


22 Personal interview via e-mail. 28 May 2014.

23 *DIAGRAM: The All-Essay Spectacular* 12.1: http://thediagram.com/12_1/oliu.html

24 Personal interview via e-mail. 28 May 2014.

25 *Brevity* 31 (Fall 2009): http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/past%20issues/brev31/miller_swerve.html


28 Personal interview via e-mail. September-October 2012.


30 All Lazar essays mentioned are from his collection, *Occasional Desire: Essays* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

31 Personal Interview via e-mail. 21 May 2014.

On Drawing (Essaying) Nonfiction: As a Set of Seven Instructions

Francesca Rendle-Short

*It proceeds, so to speak, methodically unmethodically*  
(Adorno 161).

**Instruction 1. Draw what you see**

To draw you drag a pencil across a page. It is so simple. It can be a line, a mark, shading, a smudge, or a trace. *Draw* as a verb comes from Old English *dragan* to drag, to draw, and from German *tragen* “to carry, bear.” It is related to the English *draft* meaning rough copy, something drawn. To draw, you can use pencil, graphite, pens, or other media such as my favourites: toothpaste, texts, or fingers—even breath.

Here, in this drawing, I used an HB pencil on a sheet of US Letter copy paper. It is a drawing that I did last Fall of a writing workshop on memoir called Close to the Bone that I was facilitating.
in the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa. The students sat around the table, glowing and entranced, buoyed up, drawing their own nonfiction drawings of each other. Some drawing for the very first time (so they say). All saying they had never done anything quite like this.

Drawing is a common language beyond dialect, idiom, parlance, vernacular, or idiolect. It is like music. It touches us in the same way poetry touches us. It expresses the inexpressible, that which is seen and unseen, ineffable, that about which we dream, that which we long for. To draw is to yearn. *Drawing is a form of probing. And the first generic impulse to draw derives from the human need to search, to plot points, to place thing and to place oneself* (Berger 150).

When we write, we draw. When we draw, we write.

Draw what you see. I instruct them.

Draw what is in front of you.

I explain a bit more: don’t draw what you think (imagine, desire) you should see. Not what you think you are thinking you see. Nor what you think a drawing should look like – an imposed interpretation, imitation, a caricature. This is not wish drawing. Draw what you are actually looking at what you are really seeing, even if it doesn’t necessarily make sense. Draw nonfiction. Positive and negative space. Draw truth – what you see as your perceived truth. Draw an *is-drawing*, what is there.

*Just because you have looked at something doesn’t mean that you have seen it. Just because something is available instantly to vision does not mean that it is available instantly to consciousness* (Roberts).

Draw what you don’t see at first glance.

Draw in the way you least expected.

Be surprised (from Medieval Latin *superprehendere* meaning “seize”).

**Instruction 2. Try**

When you ask writers to draw it is a very different thing than asking visual artists to draw (although I have done this too, and there are surprises – but that’s another story). The doing of
it begins as a set of instructions from the verb *instruere*, from *in-“upon, toward” + struere “pile up.”* I tell them: I want you to draw each other. You’re to look at the other person, their face, a steady gaze. Study them. You’re not to lift the pen off the page. I want you to draw what you see of their face. What you are really seeing – glimpsing, detecting, noting, recognising.

*Draw what you see* perhaps from an Indo-European root shared by Latin *sequi*, “to follow.”

It’s very simple: you just need to keep peering at your neighbour, the person you are drawing, and them at you: not at the page. Take your time. Keep looking at them. Keep trying (from Old French *trier “sift”).* Keep your pencil on the page and don’t look down at what you are drawing, it will distract and confuse you. Also, try not to over think it.

Open yourself up to being vulnerable, exposed, to not knowing how things might turn out, to disquiet and doubt, discomfort. It is about giving yourself permission to look, permission to play, permission to fail.

For example, three drawings of me seeing me, me seizing myself in a mirror.

The one positioned to the left is a fast one, a minute long (I have set myself a project of drawing myself each day for the duration of my visit to the States, which is about six weeks or 47 drawings in all). At a glance, at the one on the left, the quick one, there is not a great likeness, it’s not “very good,” it is sketchy – but being good or not – whatever that might be – is not the point. Drawing is. Plotting.
Searching. *Probing*. Inch by half inch across the page – dragging, swimming, floating. Making music with a mark, a smudge, a scratch. Improvised poetry. It doesn’t matter how it comes out – in the sense of it being right or wrong – although how it does come out is very, very interesting. The point of it is in the doing.

If you write anything you have to risk something. It is the same with drawing, perhaps more so, especially if you are a writer, if you are not known for your drawing. It teaches you about being human, about being humble, unguarded. Taking risk is at the heart of the human experience. Being human is an experiment in uncertainty, like writing.

*While it is in progress it is all movement, change, alternation, succession, association, separation* (Huizinga 9).

Taking a risk is about trying something out. To try that of “attempt to do” from early fourteenth century. Much like the verb *assay* “to try, endeavor, strive,” like writing this essay. I can always stand still. I can always draw me (or write me – German *reißen* to drag, sketch, tug). Without scruple, Adorno says, playful and free. Give yourself up. Give yourself permission to do something you’ve never done before. Go on. Give it a burl; give it a fly.

**Instruction 3. Go back 47 times (look at your fish)**

It was the great great great grandfather of the essay, Michel de Montaigne, who declared in 1580 in a note to his reader:

Reader, thou hast here an honest book ... that means preserve more whole, and more life-like ... I desire therein to be viewed as I appear in mine own genuine, simple, and ordinary manner, without study or artifice: it is myself that I paint (*c’est moy que je peins*).

*Moy que je peins.*

So here, like Montaigne, it is me that I draw (*je peins*), one day at a time, one bathroom mirror by one bathroom mirror, one mark by one pencil mark, one eye by eye. And the result? I draw myself. Draw I/eye. *A mirror me, yes, but still a me me ... the price of nonfiction is the humiliation of being found out, being seen* (Carlin & Rendle-Short 6).

Here, *me me* by three.
Once drawn, a drawing allows us to see what has been drawn in a new way. Take John Berger’s irises for example drawn in ink in *Bento’s Sketchbook* (108,109). Look at them (draw them here with these words): the curl of those leaves, the frill of the edge, the stamen as if they are alive on the page like stubble, like pubic hair. Petals fold into the shape of a silk pocket. Darkness beckons. Once drawn and commanding independent shape and aspect of their own on the page, we configure them again, write our eye, colour in and make proportion. Make story.

*Iris open like books,* Berger writes. *At the same time, they are the smallest, tectonic quintessence of architecture* (107).

Or take this drawing of a soda pop can, a drawing an undergraduate student did when a graduate student from my memoir workshop took these drawing instructions back to the writing classroom as a TA. Drawings of soda pop getting smaller and smaller from the first taste as the pop disappears and quickly morphs into an empty can through “crests and troughs.” “Knowing an experience and actually experiencing it are vastly different,” he writes (Bernickus).
So to return to those eyes again of mine (the one above now on the far left, the middle one chronologically – “other way this time”): looking at me looking at them looking at them in order to draw them on the page so they can look back at me to tell me something about me drawing them and the passage of time between them being drawn and them being viewed as drawing. What was I thinking? *Write* – what I was thinking.

Why do I paint my own portrait? asks Michel de Montaigne. *I show myself in my entirety: at one view the skeleton, muscles, and veins – here a cough and there a heartbeat, and their elusive effects. It is not my deeds I write – it is I and my essence* (Lowenthal 135).


*We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself; constituting what is present to us as we are* (Berger 9).

Things in a circle.
Us as we.
Are.

“Look, look, look,” was Professor Agassiz’s repeated injunction to his student as he studied his fish.

“Facts are stupid things until brought into connection with some general law” (Schudder).

So when Samuel Scudder really looked at the fish, this is what happened. His eyes bulged a “huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol.” He was reduced to two hands, two eyes, and the fish. The act of gazing: “conscious of a passing feeling of disappointment.”
“At last a happy thought struck me – I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature.”

Look at your fish!
It’s taken over a month of drawings or more (c’est moy) to shift in angles, to look the other way, to really draw my face, to see something unseen. Face as fish.

“A pencil is one of the best of eyes,” Schudder’s professor Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz said, “I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet, and your bottle corked.”

So here’s the lesson. Keep your specimen wet.

Instruction 4. Draw her face

This drawing exercise I am doing with the nonfiction writing students in the graduate program is one I did years and years ago in Canberra Australia when I was in a workshop led by Australian writer Robert Dessaix. I can’t remember what the workshop was about exactly, nor who was taking the workshop with me, but I do remember drawing one of the others who must have been sitting next to me, and I remember it was someone I didn’t know, and I remember too that extraordinary feeling of being rushed with adrenaline at being asked to look at a stranger at someone else – really look. It was incredible. A revelation.

Really looking is not what we do, normally, in everyday life, not really looking at other people. We are told it is rude, we know it is rude (we’ve learnt this from a very young age). Ordinarily, we’d be called mad if we were caught gazing. Probing. It’s not polite. And if we must do it, then do it without being caught.

As if reading.
By touch.

I let the charcoal held between my thumb and two fingers draw, as if reading by touch some kind of braille (Berger 10).

Drawing is uncomfortable. It is the closest you come to another body (apart from sex and intimacy). There’s tenderness to the movement of graphite over the page, the emerging colour and contour. The likeness. Truthiness. But it hurts too. Sôfte: in the drawing of body. Poetic: not trying to get it right. Dulcie: making
allowances, letting it be, letting touch – essaying – trying touch.
– On the left now. Inch by inch.

(And how differently these three drawings look when they are arranged differently across the page – always looking at the relation between – this time chronologically.)

You search touch by touch, writes John Berger (Berger 22). To draw her face is to touch; our drawings are the result of touch. It is the trace of the artist at work, a hand over the page.

To see someone touching is to imagine doing so; and to imagine doing so is to begin to wonder how it might feel to be that person, to inhabit the situation. (Paton 11)

Essaying touch through drawing nonfiction is about not knowing how to draw, nor pretending you can draw. It is a way of thinking through the experience through the doing of the thing itself, through the practice of touch, of drawing by not thinking you actually know anything, but drawing nonetheless by emptying yourself out, following impulse, instinct. Like writing poetry: like opening ourselves up to the possibility of saying the very things we are “most determined to hide – even from ourselves” (Santos 11).

Mix of feelings. Yes.
I am not allowed to look at the page at what it is I am drawing. Transgressive. Of course.
I have to look at the person in front of me, the person I am drawing, really look.
A lesson in form as well as content and style.
I must commit to the page without any time to think about what I am drawing or what my subject would think of my drawing of them. I just have to keep drawing, keep the pencil moving across the page, keep being honest.

My neighbour’s face as fish.

Ordinarily it would be frowned upon and you’d be accused of being voyeuristic, socially unacceptable, certifiable even. But here, in this context, being asked to look, to really look.

To draw: *dragan, tragen* “to carry, bear.”

**Instruction 5. Make mistakes**

*To give up to not knowing, to be uncertain of the name of things: that space is the place where possibility lives and in my mind it shimmers bright as a blue summer sky.* (Cunningham 24)

The only way to get to know something is to draw it says John Ruskin. So here I am drawing in my orange field book the William Merritt Chase fish I found in The Art Institute of Chicago. *I see how little I saw before. Again.*

Will you look at those Merritt Chase fish all silvers and soft greys and dove tones. The lobster all orange, all contrast to the fish (was it a lobster, a baby lobster, out of proportion to the fish). I’m not interested in the lobster; I’m interested in the fish. (There is no lobster in this fish drawing.) The fish exist for me in their absence.

Permission to play. Go out on a limb.
There are three fish; no, there is one fish and two small fish lying across one another. To look and really look. Really see. These fish: silvers and soft winter greys. Not the lobster. A catalogue of fish.

Even when you are afraid of failure. Even when you know that you will fail.

And what is a terrible drawing anyway? Is it something that doesn’t look like a drawing, doesn’t look like what we think a drawing should look like? Not looking but seeing; not drawing to draw.

At the second workshop we agreed to do an experiment and instead of drawing and not watching the page, we allowed ourselves to look down as we drew. But it wasn’t the same. Everyone said so. Because. We’d watched ourselves thinking through lines and marks. Our looking concentration was broken. We were working with studium not punctum (that thing that pricks, says Roland Barthes, is accident and bruise). We’d caught ourselves anticipating what a drawing must look like before it was even done. We were drawing fiction – and not was it is in the making – not nonfiction. When we finished, instead of showing off our drawings to each other and later, proudly, sticking them up on the fridge, we all ripped up those pages. We threw them away. They really were horrible. Poor, derivative nonsense. Without spark. Frisson.

Not things in a circle.
Not what is present.
Not as we are.
Accident.
Bruise.

I am reading Frank Schaeffer’s book Crazy for God. Then, I get to this: Artists are like creatures who swallow themselves. We process our lives into what we make (384). And this: It’s the mistakes I’m interested in. That’s where you hit the truth button (404).

So here is all praise to swallowing.
And making mistakes.
And fish.
Instruction 6. *Try, try, try again*

We are in a memoir workshop, Close to the Bone. We are writing memoir, generating material, finding voice. We are drawing; we are putting pencil to paper.
1. Draw what you’ve been writing about.
2. Draw what you’re *not* writing about what’s absent, what’s missing, what you are avoiding to say.
3. Start writing again.
Drawing as a generative writing exercise.
For what it’s worth, this is what they said afterwards, unprompted:
*This drawing is revealing things.*
*Helps me think in a different way.*
*It’s nonlinear.*
*I’m finding out things that I didn’t know were part of what I was writing.*

Instruction 7. *Play*

My final instruction (one last drawing): if in doubt, I say, pretend you are playing. So, I do. For example, as I listen to Eliot Weinberger read his poem *The Stars: What Are They?* I draw him reading his poem. His words are an encyclopaedic rendition about stars – nails nailed to the sky. An inventory no less. *They regulate the prices of ice and fish.* Repetition and pattern. There. There. There. Up there. Up there. They are a kind of celestial cheese churned into light.
There. Up.
There.
This drawing of line and word takes me back to the Prairie Lights Bookshop, to watching Weinberger’s brow shift and furrow as he reads, curl and sheen, to thinking about Weinberger’s connection to Australia through Giramondo Press and his collection of essays, *Wildlife*, and thinking really, what a small world we live in. To musing on the cold glass of water on the lectern. How good it must taste. In the end. To the thunderous serious applause when he finishes. To play.

Nothing can go wrong with play because it is just that – *play*. Even making mistakes are the expectations of playing. There is a great sense of surmise and anticipation. It is performance and theatre. It is both writer and reader. Johan Huizinga says it creates order – it *is* order (10). We can practice our playing by playing. Practice at doing something we have never done before.

It is Huizinga who directs our attention to the value of play (8–10). It is in fact freedom, he writes. Play is “intermezzo.” It is “an interlude” in our lives. Play as a necessity is characterised by being finite. It is safe to do. It doesn’t have to go on forever. *While it is in progress it is all movement, change, alternation, succession, association, separation* (9). We can make mistakes – in truth it’s better if we DO make mistakes (*mesprendre*). We become children again. Anything is possible. Nothing vexatious. How could it be otherwise when the verb play comes from Middle Dutch *pleien* to leap for joy, dance, rejoice, and be glad?

That day we played. That day we drew each other in our nonfiction class but not in silence. Everyone laughed. All the writers in the room that had never done such a thing (not that
there was anybody there that wasn’t a writer), they didn’t consider that they were artists that they drew when they started. They were writers. They wrote. But look here. Here they are drawing. Hooting. Flabbergasted. Here they are so pleased so glad with the results, with the doing, the \textit{tragen/dragan} – rejoicing, leaping – in marks and smudges and shadings all over the page.

    To play. Draw. Also to write. How to essai: “to succumb to happy accidents” (McCrary 71).

    \textit{The surface of the drawing – its skin, not its image – make me think of how there are moments when a dancer can make your hairs stand on end} (Berger 14).

    So here we are, dancing. Hairs.

    On.

    End.

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In the creation of a prose poem or a lyric essay or a haibun or prosimetrum, we cross genres by fusing elements of one literary, text-based genre with another literary, text-based genre—melding or coupling nonfiction and poetry. With the *imagessay*, as I would term both the visual essay and the video essay, we’re crossing one discipline with another, essentially blending a form of visual media (photography or cinema) with a form of literary nonfiction. As familiar as we are with nonfiction as essay or literary journalism or narrative text, with thematic exhibitions of photographs, and with documentary film, in which voiceover narration informs while visual elements simultaneously enact or confirm, the idea of a visual or a video essay isn’t a difficult or alien concept. Except, of course, that they aren’t exactly documentaries.
The challenge of combining visuals with text may be one of deciding whether the images illustrate the words, as a supplement, or whether the images and words are integrated and interdependent. My favorite editions of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Deerslayer* and Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* have illustrations by N. C. Wyeth and Gustave Dore, respectively, but these images are merely splendid additions rather than integral elements. On the Internet, the insertion of some visual separating segments of text is commonplace. Every essay or article posted in the online journal *Brevity* has a photograph attached, usually by an editor rather than the author; each article on the digital version of *The New Yorker* also includes a relevant illustration: a photo of men kissing for an essay on sex in gay novels, a still from a film or television show for a media review. At the other end of the spectrum graphic memoirs like Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* or *Are You My Mother?* or a work of literary journalism combining text and photography like *Salt Dreams* by William deBuys and Joan Meyers are works in which text and image are interlocking, fully balanced and harmonious, each meant to enhance or complement one another. Inevitably much else will fall on different locations along the line that stretches between these two poles.

What I am terming *imagessay* in regard to visuals in prose essays refers to works in which image is integral to the essay, provided or selected by the author and intimately involved in the generation or the expression of the text. We are accustomed to ekphrasis in poetry, in which a poet reacts to and/or interacts with a work of art: Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” or Williams’ “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.” The imagessay is often similarly ekphrastic, similarly concerned with examining the response that an image prompts in the essayist. This is essentially what happens in representative works by Lawrence Sutin and Judith Kitchen.

In *A Postcard Memoir* Sutin’s fascination with the way certain antique postcards affected him led him to gather a collection of his own. He claims, in his introduction, that either “certain memories of mine began to seep into certain postcards” or others “challenged me to come out after them and fight like a writer.” Eventually he realized “that they were egging me on through the stations of my life.” Sutin’s “chapters” are usually a page long,
sometimes two, with an accompanying photo of a postcard. The images are always antique, usually foreign, and objectively unrelated to the author’s life, except for the ways in which they inspire in him memories or personal reflections. The cover photo shows a young man in suit and bowler hat perched on a crescent moon, its face in profile, and stars in the background; in the prose that faces that image in the book Sutin considers himself at the age of the “Man in the Moon” on the postcard: “By the time I graduated from college I was I think what you’d call a fellow who knew what was what.” The image of a woman in a theatrical riding costume identified as M’lle Bianca on a postcard labeled “Gruff auf dem Cirkus” makes him consider a short-lived crush on a fellow student named Cara; a photo of “Father Holding Baby” recalls his failure at dealing with his crying infant; a photo of the “Dinosaur Exhibit at the Century of Progress Exposition” triggers a meditation on the nature of evil. In a sense the genre-crossing hybrid nature of the book resembles an interdisciplinary version of a haibun journal, with photographs substituting for haiku—the reader is continually drawn to the image despite its apparent distance from the prose and then back to the prose from the image. Over time the circumstantial and the intimate merge, until we feel in the most compelling segments that the personal is always part of the universal and vice versa, no matter how remote from one another they might initially appear.

In Half in Shade: Family, Photography, and Fate, Judith Kitchen, working from a “haphazard collection of boxes and albums [. . .] my mother had managed to save from the floods,” set herself the challenge “to give ‘voice’ to what is inherent in the visual” and “to keep the visual from dominating, making all my thoughts redundant.” She used the photographs “as triggering devices,” trying, as she says, “to interact [. . .] to animate and resurrect.” The cover image is repeated in the book as the subject of “Young Woman on Fence,” an interrogation of an image of a young woman in glasses, shirt, tie, sport coat, and knickers perched on a white fence with her feet resting on a narrow tire. Kitchen examines the composition of the shot, the significance of the pose, the clues to the circumstances. Her mother has not identified the woman or the place or the date and Kitchen speculates about her garb, her attitude, her background and her aspirations. The speculation leads to reflections on her own
childhood: “I learned how to be a boy from my books. [...] To be a boy was to be free from the eyes of those who told me who I should be.” It may be that all ekphrasis exposes the individual interpreting what is viewed, but here and throughout the book the generally short essays repeatedly wonder about the mother’s relationship to the people in the albums and reflect on the author’s sense of her mother (and other relatives) as well as her own sense of herself. In “Who” she envies an unnamed girl in a photo standing among chickens by the side of a house, with a chicken perched on her left shoulder, and reflects on the farm environment that likely existed “off-lens.” “I want this moment,” she writes, “but not what it stands for. Want one minute of overlapping shadow, one slapdash second of light. Quick, while she has a perch on pleasure.” In “Where” she compares her childhood to that of a young girl in a photo standing with her grandfather in a cornfield—the girl and the author would have been the same age in the same year and their environment but not their family life would have been similar. In other segments she considers photos of her mother and of other family members and eventually one photograph of herself sitting on the bottom of a stepladder with a friend sitting at the top. Throughout the book we need the images to understand what triggers the prose and we need the prose to understand why the images are there. The relationship is symbiotic, harmonious, hybrid.

In an imagessay we can’t separate the image from the essay, anymore that we can separate the prose from the poem in a prose poem or the lyric from the essay in a lyric essay. The aesthetic question to ask is whether the visual elements enhance the meaning of the text and whether the verbal elements enrich our understanding of the images. The degree of intimacy or interplay between text and image might be located on a sliding scale on which a point somewhere determines when they no longer function together as an imagessay but have become either a mere illustration accompanying a text (like those random photos on blogs) or a mere prose account accompanying an image (like explanatory text below photos on blogs). In an imagessay the relationship between image and text is symbiotic, each serving the needs of the other, as if ekphrasis might also involve the image’s reflections on the text. Essays offered online can readily display this symbiosis.
“St. Francis & the Isle of Foula” by Lynne Shapiro is essentially a travel narrative, set on a remote island off the coast of Great Britain where the narrator participates in research on northern sea birds. She tells us that, as an art historian, she was fascinated by a Bellini painting of St. Francis with birds and, as a novice birder, she was intent on having a birding adventure. Foula is the place she elected to have that adventure, and part of the essay actually is adventurous: her descent with the other researchers into a 200-foot-deep crevice called the Sneck o’ the Smallie to a narrow ledge at the edge of a frigid sea. She’s also been reading a biography of St. Francis, in which he has frequent encounters with lepers, and learns that the research encampment is located on the site of a former leper colony. When she returns from the island she chooses to print a photograph she’d taken of a winter wren and discovers a figure dressed in Franciscan robes in the background. She writes: “Why was this photo, the last I’d taken on Foula, the one I chose to print? The unseen was an integral part of my experience on Foula . . . My murky photograph of a bird and a man became a representation of the enigmatic island. Memory is compartmentalized, like an island, and Foula has transformed over the years from a real place I actually walked, end to end, into a mystical memory.” She notes that, in an earlier biography she read, St. Francis was credited with having “discerned the hidden things of nature with his sensitive heart.”

Essays are often the essayist’s way of exploring synchronicities and associations that she alone finds relevant, as a means of sorting out the connections and their significance. That alone would justify this essay, but Shapiro has included photographs in her essay and they add to the evidence and atmosphere of the text. One image is a detail of Bellini’s painting of St. Francis. Five other photographs were taken by the author. One black and white photograph of the island gives us a sense of how barren and windswept Foula is, the lack of color adding to the chill of the place. Another gives us a perspective into the Sneck o’ the Smallie and heightens our appreciation of the daunting aspects of her descent. The first photo of the essay, behind the title, is a color shot of the croft house and sea arch along the edge of the island, with an image of a statue of St. Francis ethereally superimposed upon it. The final photo is a black and white shot
of a hand holding a winter wren with an out-of-focus image of a
man in Franciscan robes and sunglasses in the background looking
at the person holding the bird. The images of the island give us a
more concrete sense of place than the text does; they reinforce one
another. The images of St. Francis or a Saint Francis-like figure
reinforce the associations the author is making between the island
and the saint and, along with the opening Bellini image, make the
linkage tangible. The visual elements of the essay are not simply
illustrative; they extend and amplify the impressions of the text.

The way text and image emphasize one another is typical of
the imagessay. In “Setnet Fishing in Uyak Bay,” about living on an
island off the coast of Alaska, Sarah Loewen includes photographs
that enhance our sense of place and complement the narrative
about the family’s fishing and the challenges of living where they
do. “Sunset Canto,” with text by William deBuys and photographs
by Alex Harris, an excerpt from their book, River of Traps: A New
Mexico Mountain Life, offers a lyrical moment at the end of a typical
day when the narrator talks quietly with an old man who personifies
the spirit of the place, the figure in the accompanying photograph.
The moment at sunset is all the richer for our visual sense of the
man who is the focus of the moment in the text. Shelley Salamensky,
in “Postcards from Birobidzhan: The Life and Death and Life of
the Jewish Autonomous Republic,” uses a series of images to link
segments of an essay that combines history and personal travel—
her photos have been doctored to appear like postcards and the
brief text segments read like expanded postcards.

In all these cases the images are tightly linked to the texts,
and indeed each may have influenced the other. Christine Stewart-
Nunez, describing the process behind her online essay “New Lens,”
says that she selected twelve photos to write about out of around
200 or so taken on family travels and only recognized “the thread
of ‘Holden unfolding’” (Holden is her son) when she was working
on the text for the fifth one. That helped her narrow her choices to
nine images, and she compressed each segment after drafting it to
harmonize the whole. In other words, the text affected the images
and the images affected the text. Linda Barrows, who composed an
unpublished imagessay titled “Arabesque” from images found on
public sites, similarly noted that, “in selecting images for my own
piece, I was inspired to revise some of the prose to expand meaning or change direction. That was a modest beginning of a holistic process for me as a writer.” The idea of the imagessay emerging from a holistic process is a key element of the genre crossing going on in this form.

It may simply be that technological advances in media have made possible forms of literary presentation that were already inherent in literature but restrained by earlier limitations of print publication. Certainly, ekphrasis is an aesthetic urge we date back to Homer in poetry, and the possibility of the image serving as a representation of the text—a reversal of our usual sense of ekphrasis—has been made more likely by our contemporary media. Think of the way video has made it possible to develop popular song beyond the audio, in the same way audio recordings moved it beyond sheet music and live performance. Music videos can often be highly innovative, painstaking, groundbreaking mergers of the visual and the aural; the best of them model the kind of genre crossing that genuinely becomes a hybrid artform of considerable power.

A good many music videos challenge the simplest interpretation of a song by adding visual elements that alter, heighten, or expand its meaning. Take, for example, the song “Wonder” by Natalie Merchant. When you hear it or when you read the lyrics, it seems to be a song of self-celebration (“I must be one of the wonders of god’s own creation”), an assertion of individuality and pride, delivered by one strong individual, but the video of the song shows a great many females of different ages, races, and body types mingling with one another on a stage, Merchant herself among them. Almost instantaneously the song is not an individual assertion but an anthem. Or take, for another example, the video for “Constant Craving” by k. d. lang, where scenes of lang in the character of a reflective person backstage at a theater are interspersed with scenes of nonmusical performers onstage and reaction or anticipation shots of an audience. The theatrical performance evokes Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, in its own way a drama of existential longing; the elements of the theatrical production and its audience add new dimensions to the lyrics of the song, in some ways universalizing it, and the song adds new dimensions to the theatrical elements.

We don’t usually think of music videos as literary works,
but I would argue that they are certainly always rhetorical acts and, in their aesthetics, depending on the video, often highly poetic or dramatic. For an arresting mix of the visual with actual poetry, consider the online site for Motionpoems, a project begun by Todd Boss and Angela Kassube, which matches poetry from *The Best American Poetry* with animators who create short films in response to the poems. The poems are both read aurally and made visual. The project is collaborative, but the poets and animators don’t necessary work together on the films—the visual components are distinctly the work of the animators in reaction to the work of the poets. In recent years individual poets, whether in similar collaborations or in isolation, have also been combining poetry with video in a form some of them like to term “cinépoetry,” in many cases clearly drawing on the techniques of music video, as individual essayists have also been doing.

The addition of sound and video to a visual essay raises the level of complication we feel when we encounter it. If you were to read Lisa Bickmore’s essay “Last Day” simply as a prose text, you would find it a meditation on aging and loss—“but always, behind every other thing, my consciousness murmurs away in a small but perpetual colloquy about how everything there is is gone or going”—and a realization of what she has missed and will miss in her life. At its center is a narrative section about taking the wrong road and driving past a lake formed by an earthquake fifty years earlier and talking to people in a bar who give contradictory directions meant to get her on the right road. The metaphorical dimensions of these elements don’t need much spelling out. It is a quiet, contemplative essay. On the webpage for terrain.org, the online journal where it was first published, you can click a link that will open up “the full text of the essay” for silent reading.

The webpage, however, centers on a video screen with an image of branches in a tree and when you click the Play button and pass the title card, you hear the essayist read the text of the essay while you watch the tree limbs sway in an audible wind. About a minute into her reading, as she starts the third paragraph, we hear a piano begin to play a slow melody and soon the familiar image of a grid on a geographic survey map appears against the backdrop of the trees. A little hand appears on the map and she begins to be more
specific about where she is in Montana; the hand pushes against the map and it enlarges (or zooms in) to highlight the very place she is talking about. The map images keep changing and becoming more specific about the location. Then at about two minutes into the video, the screen opens on a video of a body of water with a road in the background. When she begins to talk about the earthquake the camera zooms in on the dead trees and then begins to pan around the lake while she recites the fourth and fifth paragraphs of her essay. The video concludes with a long shot of the ripples on the lake.

The essay is still contemplative, of course, but it now asks us to respond to the music and the imagery. The music heightens the mood of the essay; the images heighten our sense of physical context; the narration by the author heightens the intimacy of the text, makes it more palpably personal. (Turn away from the computer screen and you can listen to it as an audio essay.) Like a music video the video essay has a wide range of possibilities for enhancing and heightening and empowering the prose of its text.

In her contributor’s notes for a video essay titled “That Kind of Daughter,” published by Triquarterly Online, Kristen Radtke makes a compelling point about the form. She writes, “For me, the most exciting complication that the video essay can introduce is the tension between two disparate ideas coming together. Where perhaps the ‘braided essay’ has worked to create a conversation between two seemingly unrelated threads, video essays can do this more cohesively than print can—we can truly engage with both threads at exactly the same moment.” She tells us something about the complications of being able to see the essay both in terms of text and in terms of image. “This has recently become my process—wrestling with an essay as text, then an essay as image, and then finally giving into its need to exist beyond the page.” She wrestles to avoid producing a work in which the visuals “dismantle a reader’s imagination” or merely illustrate what is already apparent on the page. “Perhaps the biggest obstacle we face as artists and writers is how we can craft visuals that do more than just offer a narrative that mirrors the text.”

“That Kind of Daughter” has been described by Marilyn Freeman as “an autobiographic nonlinear triptych that is at once
lyrical and disquieting. Sequenced stop-motion black-and-white paper cuts visually illustrate, and momentarily reflexively startle, a hushed and dispassionate telling.” The stop-motion images morph from one shape to another—one section of the essay shows how she does it—and both reinforce the prose and link the sections of the triptych, complicating the sense of self that the narrator presents to us. The text and the images are equally vital to the essay.

John Bresland, in “On the Origins of the Video Essay,” observes that we all now “have access to nonlinear editing tools” available on our computers and “can shoot video, compelling video, on a cell phone.” Because of that accessibility to digital media, the nature of written creativity has altered: “The act of writing has always been a personal pursuit, a concentrated form of thought. And now filmmaking, too, shares that meditative space.” Where cinema used to be a collaborative art, one in which the screenwriter’s role was separate from the director’s, the cinematographer’s, and the editor’s, digital technology makes it possible for all those roles to be combined into one role: the role of the video essayist. As Bresland also puts it, it is possible, for some writers perhaps even preferable, “to write this way, with a pen in one hand, and a lens in the other.”

For some reader/viewers the interdisciplinary nature of the imagemessay is problematic; they want it to be one thing or another. Accepting that it won’t be—that it can’t be—will be difficult for them. As Freeman writes, “There is no primacy. The video essay does not privilege literary text over image, nor image over text, or either over sound or vice versa.” As with the need to read photographs together with text in the visual essay, the video essay “reader” has to learn how to absorb all the elements of the video essay simultaneously, as the video essayist must.

The imagemessay is a hybrid literary form, and like any hybrid literary form it offers challenges to artist and audience alike. Some of the challenges are aesthetic—many readers resist the idea that text can be enhanced in any way by media, many writers are content with the aesthetics of the form they already work in and resistant to innovation. Some of the challenges are interpretive—how can reader/viewers adjust to the bicameral demands of an imagemessay? How can artists amend the strategies that have served them well in their familiar genre? Of course, the simple resolution to these challenges
is to ignore them, in the same way that I ignore books about golf, will never write about fashion, and feel no need to abandon textual prose. But for some readers and writers the *imagessay* opens doors into expression and interpretation; it expands the possibilities for making meaning out of our world and out of our lives by offering alternative ways to arrive at meaning, alternative means to transmit it. At the risk of transformation, it might be worthwhile for some of us to explore those possibilities, those alternative ways.

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I was warned that angry writing would drive readers away. I first heard this in graduate school, where we read Jamaica Kincaid’s essay “On Seeing England for the First Time.” The short essay struck me then, as now, as intellectually challenging, observant and detailed, as well as reflective and controlled. I came to class prepared to talk about the language, but the conversation turned to the hazards of anger on the page. My fellow students felt repelled by Kincaid’s tone and her single-minded pursuit of the slippery topics of race and colonialism in the Caribbean. It was not the topic, they said, but her method, which seemed to make some of them feel as though they had been blasted by a dense and sailing cannonball of history, place, experience, family, grief, and anger. In a sense, if they had no knowledge of the conversation about colonialism and race, they had been blasted, though I’d argue this was the effect of a subway rushing past suddenly from a tunnel, offering an invitation to get on board. But they felt, first, the rush of a conversation in which they could not get their bearings, and they read this as “angry.”

I can’t remember what I contributed to the discussion, but I know it was no cogent manifesto in support of anger as a multifaceted wellspring of vitality and insight. I left the workshop table that night vaguely troubled with my own prospects and potential subject matter. My first reaction was selfish. Oh no, I thought, yet another example of why I shouldn’t be in graduate school. I was writing about the debacle of the U.S. health insurance system, among other topics, and generating Word documents narrated by a spitting frothing banshee. I knew I wasn’t getting beyond myself on that topic. But Kincaid had done it, in my view: transcended her own experience to get to meaning.

Yet she hadn’t reached some of the readers in that room. What did that mean? In one sense, I believe her essay had succeeded in bothering, in lodging an unavoidable burr in the psyche of those who engaged with her essay, an itch with an impact that might
unfold over time to bridge the very different social worlds of that writer and those reader. Some authors claim to not care about reaching readers, but I do, and I’m interested in writing not as salesmanship at the one extreme or creation of art in a vacuum on the other but as human communication. The readers’ reactions in that workshop point to a larger gap, a point of trouble, when an author presents experiences that are both unfamiliar to the reader and that make the narrator angry. This gap is not something to be bridged over with an easy prohibition of “don’t go there.” It is rich and instructive but offers no simple answers.

The complication embodied by Kincaid and her work is that anger is not neutral. Each reader sitting around the table had a different ability to be present for Kincaid’s writing, and each reaction was a snapshot, a portrait of the reader and the writer together, a continuation and elaboration of the essay’s theme. In the worst case scenario, difference can trigger stereotypes that subconsciously influenced readers’ judgment about the motives and the intellectual ability of an author to make meaning from an experience. But while there was no malice in resisting Kincaid’s work, there was a gap in experience. And readers bring their emotional baggage to the reading of a text, especially when the text itself contains identifying details about the life of the writer. Difference and anger combined to make the topic and the author seemed too “intense.”

Does that mean her task—or ours, if we take on a similar challenge—is so difficult as to not be attempted? At my moment of pessimism, it seemed to me that a writer might despair of reaching any reader who couldn’t relate to one’s subject matter. Or, instead of despair, the writer might dust herself off and then have to perform such amazing pyrotechnics to scale the wall of the reader’s resistance to anything with “heat” that the writing chops would have to doubly compensate for the hints of emotion on the page. It seemed sad that literature, while such an able container, had not evolved more carrying capacity—or that we had not.

After that conversation in workshop, I was particularly attuned to matters of form and craft that might allow me to introduce shades of emotion without triggering the reader’s judgment of me as angry. (I also didn’t want to overtax the reader, of course, or present a rant with no emotional modulation.) Maybe I could slip my readers
a bitter pill with humor, use analogies and deadpan presentation, experiment with artful formal presentation or sidelong glances. Maybe I would just use white space to dodge all the hard stuff. In between bouts of discouragement, I began with the help of lots of coffee to become excited by the fantastic challenge.

Then, as well as now, I understood that a whiny rant ripped out of a journal didn’t satisfy a reader. Then, as well as now, I felt the dripping condescension of the finger-wagging against “writing as therapy.” I wasn’t angry at those who expressed revulsion at this “writing as therapy” because I saw how neatly this resistance to reading “emotionalism” on the page mapped to the author’s status as an outsider of some sort in society. James Frey could formlessly gush and emote all over the page and lie and still sell books, because he was a white guy. The “angry woman” and the “angry black man” and the “angry black woman” among many other possible permutations of identity immediately trigger stereotypes that can lead to a piece of life writing being read as more or less angry and more or less thoughtful. These stereotypes reinforce the dismissal and categorization of memoir into its place in the literary landscape, a place in which the identities of the authors themselves allow for easy sorting and judgment based less on the writing than on the life.

But anger itself—not its misunderstandings—is fascinating, a territory as vast and vague as love. I am always surprised there aren’t more angry essays, more essays and memoirs transported by moments of road rage and petty envy and bitterness massive righteous pissed-offedness. Essayist Philip Lopate advised essayists to write about the “mind at work.” Everything is connected from the brain stem on down. But it is of course much easier and more marketable to go to Guatemala or Tuscany and write about the colorful produce and the sunsets than to tour inside one’s own less attractive neighborhoods.

Many writers don’t want to go into their own anger, because it’s a mess in there and they worry they’ll never make it out alive. And even if a writer is in touch with his or her anger, writing it presents the danger that a writer might be tagged as “angry.” I honestly also don’t want to read an “angry” writer, though nobody in practice sustains rage for very long. Instead I’m hungry to read
people whose work dives into their own moments of anger to see it, to pick it apart, to offer a taxonomy and a field guide and an owner’s manual.

What is anger, anyway? Is it the image of a cartoon man with steam coming out of his ears? He’s so revved up he’s lost the ability to think, and he’s liable to commit a crime of passion in a fit of insanity. If he is a woman—and only then—he becomes a she who is “hysterical” (and not in the funny sense). Assumptions about anger run neatly into tracks laid by the fear of emotionalism and the suspicion that strong emotions of necessity switch off the intellectual circuit in the mind and body. These days, research (along with first-hand experience of those using their brains) reveals that the brain and the body don’t have a simple two-channel switch like a train track. Instead, emotion is seen as the precursor to all cognition. But that old train-track idea stigmatizes emotion. And if you’ve experienced something that makes you really upset, then you might be a permanent whack job. Crazy.

These retrograde notions of emotion as a kind of battery acid hide the distinction between anger and rage. In an interview with Tricycle Magazine, the Dalai Lama said, “anger that is motivated by compassion or a desire to correct social injustice, and does not seek to harm the other person, is a good anger that is worth having.” For a writer, the question is how to convey and use that anger to pin down and transform, to communicate with the reader, about the things that Piss One Off. In the field guide of anger, documenting the movements of any anger in one’s mind can leads to a greater understanding of how anger works and what it means, which is a benefit for the reader and the writer.

Perspective on anger comes in the form of a cooling off period in which reflection delivers insights and meaning. Vivian Gornick advises writers in The Situation and The Story to make story from the raw materials of one’s situation and finding the meaning through reflection, looking again and again at the trouble. Really, everyone is struggling in life with some version of a crappy day, so the writer should have a goal beyond merely venting on a reader by simply adding to that reader’s stress level without giving some insight or wisdom. We know this.
But there’s the problem of what Really Pisses Us Off. I have found inspiration and consternation in equal measure from William Wordworth’s description of poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility.” Tranquility might be too strong a word for those topics that continue to pique us no matter how often we feel them. Wordworth implies that there’s a trigger in the writer’s present life for the “spontaneous overflow” which impels pen to paper as the writer re-feels the initial event. What if one’s present life continues to fuel that continued anger—say, at colonialism? That isn’t the same challenge as reflecting back at a landscape seen once at a certain moment in time. More and more experiences are heaped on every day. This would be as if some demon had shackled Wordworth to a stout stake in front of his “steep and lofty cliffs” so that he had to stare at Tintern Abbey for all time.

I’ve been keeping track of what made me mad since I could hold a pen, but it’s only since I started meditating that I began to get a limited ability to write about anger. Meditation is for me less like sipping green tea and more like plunging a toilet. If there’s peace it’s mostly in being stunned by the Mac Trucks of my emotions barreling along my internal highways. I get to watch my moments of insanity like the light above Tintern Abbey. Then I have to feel the anger all over again (and again) as I sit at my computer, which is kind of overwhelming at first and then an invigorating wrestling match that demands precision.

I’ve looked hard at and learned from some of my favorite authors who explore moments and lifetimes of anger at injustice and at the petty suffering doled out by life, including Joy Williams, Sonali Deraniyagala, Richard Wright, Philip Lopate, Marita Golden, Emily Rapp, Harriet Jacobs, Scott Russell Sanders, Dorothy Allison, W.E.B. DuBois, James Baldwin, Tobias Wolff, and bell hooks, and my list is ever-growing. Many of these authors, coincidentally or not, are African-American, and/or women. What concerns me is that some of these authors (though not all) continue to be described as “angry” first, as if those emotions and the experiences that provoke them are peripheral and special interest rather than central to the human experience.

Those authors have also taught me to find an “objective correlative,” some outside thing that is real, more than a symbol,
an embodied element of the universe I can look at deeply, a thing outside myself that could stand in as a hook for larger ideas. Dick Cheney served very nicely for me as a hook in my essay for the anger I had carried and grown up in around the U.S. engagement in the Persian Gulf region. Of course, what I don’t touch in the essay is what else I made me angry at that point in my life, and the answer is: many things, and I’m still writing to figure it out. But Cheney was a way in. Thanks, Cheney.

Politics is a hard subject to write about, and in the face of that steep challenge, many essays decline and instead take on other matters, turning to an aesthetic or formal puzzle with a construction as delicate as a needlepoint pillow. When I read such constructions, I am forced to admire the skill displayed in their execution. I peer into them as I would a beautifully constructed bonsai tree or a Faberge egg. I have tried this careful form, mostly to see if I could do it, to feel like I was smart and part of the club, and I don’t think I do it well. “Go big” (or “go sloppy”) is my aesthetic, and I find myself drawn to essays with rough edges, a \textit{wabi-sabi} that revels in the brokenness and wear created by time and life.

It is good to have a density and range of forms in our work to inspire each other to experiment and to express everything that nonfiction has to offer the world. Yet I worry that such fine-threaded constructions are coming to define “the essay,” which is in the process of reifying itself as an academic and literary genre. I wholeheartedly support this consolidation as nonfiction takes its rightful place as literature, but I worry that the future canon will be those in which the white space and references to definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary carefully conceal all the freak outs and deepest sadness that will be cordoned off into memoir’s messy basement. Those emotions, too, are equally worthy of essaying, as they contain the most vulnerable points of our lives, the moments when the soul itself makes broad leaps, either forward toward justice or revenge or backward in fear.

A shorter version of this piece appears in \textit{True Stories, Well Told: From the First Twenty Years of Creative Nonfiction} (In Fact Books, 2014) and on the \textit{Creative Nonfiction} website.
Charles Lamb and Lester Bangs have little in common. Lamb was born in 1775 and raised in London, the son of a clerk; Bangs was born in 1948 in Escondido, California, the son of a truck driver, and lived also in Detroit and Manhattan. Lamb clerked for a living at the British East India Company, and wrote in his spare time for *London Magazine*; Bangs wrote mostly album reviews for a living for *Creem*, *Rolling Stone* and other magazines, and wrote all day and all night. Lamb was generous-hearted, compassionate, wry; Bangs could be a bad drunk, was sometimes mean, and was often aggressive. Lamb wrote about poetry and the theater; Bangs wrote about rock and roll. Lamb skirted direct confession while writing under a persona (“Elia”); Bangs was nakedly autobiographical. Lamb died at age 59; Bangs at 33. E.V. Lucas called Lamb “the most lovable figure in English literature”; Lou Reed (among others) said to Bangs, “You really are an asshole.” Lamb’s colleague and rival William Hazlitt, that old misanthrope, probably had more in common temperamentally with Bangs than did Lamb.

There are some similarities: both Lamb and Bangs were unmarried, and had no children; both suffered from mental duress; both practiced what they preached (Lamb wrote sonnets and a play; Bangs formed a band and released a single); both were passionate about writing; both deeply distrusted smugness.

Each wrote an essay titled “New Year’s Eve.” Here’s the opening of Lamb’s, which appeared in *London Magazine* in January of 1821:

> Every man hath two birth-days: two days, at least, in every year, which set him upon revolving the lapse of time, as it affects his mortal duration. The one is that which in an especial manner he termeth his. In the gradual desuetude of old observances, this custom of solemnizing our proper birth-day hath nearly passed away, or is left to children, who reflect nothing at all about the matter, nor understand any thing in it beyond cake and orange. But the birth of a New Year is of an interest too wide to be pretermitted by
king or cobbler. No one ever regarded the First of January with indifference. It is that from which all date their time, and count upon what is left. It is the nativity of our common Adam.

Of all sound of all bells—(bells, the music highest bordering upon heaven)—most solemn and touching is the peal which rings out the Old Year. I never hear it without a gathering-up of my mind to a concentration of all the images that have been diffused over the past twelvemonth; all I have done or suffered, performed or neglected—in that regretted time. I begin to know its worth, as when a person dies. It takes a personal colour; nor was it a poetical flight in a contemporary, when he exclaimed

I saw the skirts of the departing Year.

It is no more in what than sober sadness every one of us seems to be conscious of, in that awful leave-taking. I am sure I felt it, and all felt it with me, last night; though some of my companions affected rather to manifest an exhilaration at the birth of the coming year, than any very tender regrets for the decease of its predecessor.

Here’s the opening of Bangs’s, which appeared in Village Voice on December 26, 1979:

Lately every time you turn around somebody’s saying: “The eighties are coming!” Like at the stroke of midnite on New Year’s it’s all gonna be different! And when you tell ‘em, “Come on, you know everything’s just gonna keep on slowly sinking,” they get downright mad! Spoilsports! No sense of social duty! It’s true that I am antisocial! But so is my whole crowd. When our fave bar the Bells of Hell closed down a few months back we all stayed in our apartments instead of seeking out a new watering hole. (Perhaps suggesting that, like the buffalo, we are soon to disappear.) I told my shrink this and he said: “You’re all pathetic.”

...
I suppose you think I’m being negative. All right, if I’m negative you go tell Mother there’s something wrong with the womb! Ha, gotcha! Besides which, as the eighties loom I suspect that my antisocial minority will soon be a majority, and we’ll have an antisociety! Imagine that! Will Rogers the ultimate outlaw! And what better time to inaugurate this ghost town than New Year’s Eve! Ring out the old, ring in the old! And older and older. I ask you, have you ever had a New Year’s Eve you enjoyed? Of course not! Why? Because you’ve persisted in this insane delusion that somehow things are supposed to keep getting better, or that the cyclical nature of the ying-yang means that the earth is supposed to replenish itself or some such horseshit! Horseshit doesn’t even replenish itself. Do these sidewalks? This peeling paint, crumbling plaster, backed-up plumbing? A replenishable landlord? Fuck no!

There are two directions in which extants can go: (a) stasis or (b) decay. And New Year’s Eve is the biggest bummer yet, because we all go out with these expectations and get totally soused just so we can stand to be around each other because we’ve spent the late fall and winter’s first blush sinking deeper into TV Guide, and now we’re expected to positively revel in proximity to these globs of hideous humanity. So OF COURSE horrible scenes ensue.

An essay has elastic boundaries. What it cannot or will not do is up to the essayist. An essay starts as a blank blueprint for, say, a house; the essayist has no idea how many floors or rooms there will be, or if there will be an attic, or a basement, or on how many acres the house will sit. That is: an essay goes where it goes, forward, and back, and to the side, motored by the essayist’s own thought engine. Elastic, a blueprint, a motor: If I’ve mixed my metaphors here it’s because I’m excited, and because an essay is hard to define—I’m groping for the right language now to define the unknowable, as an essayist must. Lamb’s and Bangs’s essays about the last night of the year share the propulsion of a voice illuminating shadowy corners of personal experience. Here I sit, Lamb sighs, Bangs grumbles: let’s go.
It’s interesting to note what two essayists can do with similar subjects. Joan Didion and Phyllis Barber both write about the Hoover Dam, Didion in “At The Dam” from *The White Album* (1979), Barber in “Oh Say Can You See,” the opening chapter of her memoir *How I Got Cultured* (1992). Didion moves through her essay characteristically: her argument is thoughtful but spare; thesis-driven but questioning. “At The Dam” is brief, modest even, and asks more questions than it answers, though at the end it comes close to solving the dilemma, *Why do I keep picturing the Dam?* (Hint: it will outlast us all.) Barber is essaying the same question, though she isn’t aware that she is. Her piece is strikingly different from Didion’s, obsessive where Didion’s is cool, hyper-emotional where Didion’s is intellectual, impulsive and segmented where Didion’s is smooth and linear. The dissembling at the heart of Barber’s essay—*I don’t think about the Dam much*—is greeted skeptically by the essay itself: the image of a menacing cloud keeps floating to the surface, revealed to be a mushroom cloud from a nuclear bomb test that Barber witnessed as a child, out in the desert with her family, near the Dam. Her attempts to forget that unsettling night and its sinister connections to the Dam are subverted by an essay that insists, *You can’t forget.* As opposed to Didion’s willful and deliberate attempt to understand the Dam’s significance, Barber does all she can to look away, to block a memory. But that dam can’t hold.

When Lamb, via Elia, turns his attention to New Year’s Eve and sets “upon revolving the lapse of time,” he finds himself gravitating to thoughts of mortality, which is, along with self-examination, his essay’s real subject. Lamb gets there by traveling backwards: an admission of current regrets and self-loathing dissolves into a nostalgic remembrance of his adolescence, when thoughts of death were rare, and semi-understood. “Not childhood alone, but the young man thirty, never feels practically that he is mortal,” Lamb acknowledges. “He knows it indeed, and, if need were, he could preach a homily on the fragility of life; but he brings it not home to himself, anymore than in a hot June we can appropriate to our imagination the freezing days of December.” Soon enough after turning thirty, Lamb, who was forty-seven when he wrote the essay, began to feel the unhappy stirrings of his own mortality, and his
antipathy toward New Year’s stems from that holiday’s tendency to bring gloomy thoughts to the surface of his thinking. He can only escape into memories of the child Elia for so long, at one point questioning the value, and the maturity, of pining for the past: “That I am fond of indulging, beyond a hope for sympathy, in such retrospection, may be the symptom of some sickly idiosyncrasy.” (Take note, all essayists.) Soon enough the pealing bells of New Year’s bring him back to the ever-diminishing present.

Lamb’s joie de vivre and capacity for cheery sentiment rescue the essay from morbidity. “I am love with this green earth” he gushes. “The face of town and country; the unspeakable rural solitudes, and the sweet security of streets. I would set up my tabernacle here.” He adds, “I am content to stand still at the age to which I am arrived.” Blind guesses at the afterlife chill him: he wonders, can you hug a ghost? Are there books there? Are my books there? Can I be ironic in front of angels? What about fields, dinners, drink, friends? Are they in Heaven or are they lost forever at death? Lamb grimly accepts that there are no answers to such questions, but we ask them anyway. This line of thinking leads to the most startling and affecting sentence in the essay, one of Lamb’s great confessions: “A new state of being staggers me.”

Early in “New Year’s Eve” Lamb gives vent to some pretty intense self-criticism, admitting to deep disgust with Elia:

If I know aught of myself, no one whose mind is introspective—and mine is painfully so—can have a less respect for his present identity, than I have for the man Elia. I know him to be light, and vain, and humorsome; a notorious * * *; addicted to * * *; averse from counsel, neither taking it nor offering it; — * * * besides; a stammering buffoon; what you will; lay it on, and spare not; I subscribe to it all, and much more, than thou canst be willing to lay at his door — — — —....

Ironically, and funnily, the invective’s made more potent by what’s removed—the ellipses, which Lamb coyly admits in his notes signified nothing. The reader fills in the blanks, by imagining the worst, probably. I always do, anyway.
Cyniness and modesty disguised as vividness. Compare to Bangs, who enumerates his faults in epic, lurid detail. I don’t know that there’s a greater illustration of Michael de Montaigne’s “obedient servant of naive frankness” than Bangs. His “New Year’s Eve” is rollicking where Lamb’s is measured, a confessional piece of raw, funny autobiography, equal parts arrogant, sheepish, profane, and semi-repentant. Bangs takes his reader along on a bumpy chronological journey through a decade’s worth of New Years’ escapades (the majority of which are actual; one or two are fictionalized), blurring out his ill-mannered, adolescent behavior, especially where women, sex, hard drugs, and loud, aggressive rock & roll are involved, which is on nearly every page. Bangs drags us along to bars and to parties in the suburbs and cities, and we’re captive to his bull-dozen narratives and boorish behavior, nodding, wincing, laughing, rolling our eyes.

What rescues the essay’s considerable lewdness, even meanness, from fatal self-indulgence is Bang’s acknowledgments of his own weaknesses. Two sorry related incidents capture his guilt beneath his incivility: on New Year’s Eve 1973, drunk at a party with his ex-girlfriend, Bangs dances dirty with the hostess. This upsets his ex, and “[l]ater in the car in savage ugly liquored sexual frustration I dug one of my nails into her wrist until it bled. She told me I was a sissy. I was.” A few years later, Bangs commenced a period where he stayed drunk “and practically [took] up residence at CBGB’s,” where he “played the role of Bukowskian bohemian/artiste in ze big sitcom.” On New Years Eve 1979 Bangs hit it off with a British media writer at a party. She was spectacularly drunk, and at her apartment later that night after she passes out on the couch, Bangs robs her. “I dug in her purse for the vial, actually found myself looking for a moment at her wallet, either couldn’t go that far or realized how silly this whole charade was, grabbed the fifth of Pinch on the way out the door, stomping down just a little meaner in my badass Frye boots. Still as tough and mature obviously as the ’73 night of the famous fingernail-dig.”
Bangs’s decision to write honestly about his lousy behavior doesn’t necessarily redeem that behavior. But I find his essay moving. Like Lamb, Bangs takes the occasion of New Year’s Eve to take stock of himself, his caustic, self-mocking tone a flipside to Lamb’s more august stroll through life’s messiness, and no less human. Near the end of his piece, Bangs writes that New Year’s Eve “just seems to bring out the worst of ourselves, probably deriving from repression of the clear knowledge that we’re another year older and deeper in debt but ain’t accomplished hackshit and in fact are likely backpedaling; hatred of the rest of the human race because they’ve got our number in this department.” Feeling grim, he closes the essay: “The only alternatives re this ‘human dignity’ stuff are that old saw about crossing the International Dateline, total isolation (always a good move anyway), or perhaps most sensibly JUST GIVING INTO THE THING AND ACTING LIKE TOTAL WRETCHED DISGUSTING BEASTS.”

Lamb hears pealing bells from church towers, Bangs hears the Bells of Hell; Lamb quotes poets Samuel Coleridge and Charles Cotton, Bangs the Ramones and the Dictators; Lamb’s tone is nostalgic, his language searching, Bangs’s is coarse, plundering; Lamb ultimately ends his essay in a robust, generous mood; Bangs is in a churlish, nihilistic funk. Both writers are candidly personal, but differently so. Lamb’s editors note that his essay likely “shocked the moral sense” of his contemporary and friend, poet Robert Southey, who complained about the “absence of a sounder religious feeling” in Essays of Elia. Lamb’s self-examination pales in intensity to Bangs’s, but it can be argued that it’s more rigorous and self-effacing, where Bangs’s struts with bluster. And what of persona? Lamb was deliberately writing behind “Elia”; might Bangs, in the guise of vulnerable confessing, be celebrating his macho behavior. Their essays are wildly contrasting in tone, circumstance, and degree of revelation, but share the essayistic quality of allowing the mind its inimitable shape on the page, each attempt originating in reflection on a man-made date which purpose is to look both backwards and forwards. The vistas in each direction are as wide as the men are unique.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Douglas Atkins

G. Douglas Atkins is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Kansas, from which he retired in 2013 after 44 years of teaching, 18 of them as also Coordinator of Graduate Studies. He is the author of 24 books (so far), on a wide variety of literary, critical, and theoretical subjects, and co-editor of three others. Among his books are several on the essay, including Estranging the Familiar: Toward a Rivitalized Critical Writing (a Choice Outstanding Academic Book of the Year), Tracing the Essay: From Experience to Truth, Reading Essays: An Invitation, On the Familiar Essay: Challenging Academic Orthodoxies, T.S. Eliot and the Essay: From “The Sacred Wood” to “Four Quartets,” and E.B. White: The Essayist as First-Class Writer. Among his many awards are three for outstanding teaching and the Kenyon Review Prize for Excellence in Nonfiction Prose. Post-retirement, he continues to write on T.S. Eliot in particular and literature and religion in general. He is in the process of moving from Lawrence, Kansas, “back home” to Greenville, South Carolina.

William Bradley

William Bradley’s work has appeared in a variety of magazines and journals including The Missouri Review, Brevity, Creative Nonfiction, Fourth Genre, The Normal School, and The Utne Reader. He teaches at St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y. He has just completed his first book, a collection of essays focused on love, illness, and his own nerdy pop culture obsessions.
Colin Hosten

Colin Hosten is an essayist/memoirist/whaterist who believes in the power of words. His work has appeared most recently in OUT Magazine. Originally from Trinidad, he recently earned an MFA in Creative Nonfiction at Fairfield University, where he currently teaches in the Core Writing program. He lives in Connecticut with his husband and their dog, Bugsy.

Sonya Huber

Sonya Huber is the author of two books of creative nonfiction, Cover Me: A Health Insurance Memoir and Opa Nobody, and a textbook, The Backwards Research Guide for Writers: Using Your Life for Reflection, Connection, and Inspiration. Her work has been published in The New York Times, Creative Nonfiction, Brevity, Fourth Genre, The Chronicle of Higher Education, the Washington Post Magazine, and other journals. She received the 2013 Creative Nonfiction Award from Terrain and her work appears True Stories, Well Told: From the First 20 Years of Creative Nonfiction. She teaches in the Department of English at Fairfield University and in the Fairfield Low-Residency MFA Program.

Robert Root

An Emeritus Professor of English at Central Michigan University, Robert Root is presently Honored Visiting Faculty teaching creative nonfiction in the low-residency MFA Program in Creative Writing at Ashland University. His books on creative nonfiction include the anthology The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction, co-edited with Michael Steinberg and presently in its sixth edition; the craft text The Nonfictionist’s Guide: On Reading and Writing Creative Nonfiction; the craft anthology Landscapes with Figures: The Nonfiction of Place; and the craft study E. B. White: The Emergence of an Essayist. For fifteen years he was a contributing editor to the nonfiction journal Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction. As an essayist he has been an artist-
in-residence at Isle Royale, Rocky Mountain, and Acadia national parks. His essays have appeared in such journals as Ecotone, North Dakota Quarterly, Ascent, The Pinch, and Colorado Review and been named Notable Essays of the Year in The Best American Essays. He is the author of Recovering Ruth: A Biographer’s Tale; Following Isabella: Travels in Colorado Then and Now; Postscripts: Retrospections on Time and Place; Limited Sight Distance: Essays for Airwaves and Happenstance, a memoir with photographs. His website is www.rootwriting.com.

Francesca Rendle-Short

Francesca Rendle-Short grew up in Brisbane, Australia. She is a novelist, memoirist and essayist, author of the critically acclaimed memoir-cum-novel *Bite Your Tongue* and the award-winning novel *Imago*. Recent short memoirs have appeared in *Killing the Buddah, The Best Australian Science Writing 2013* (NewSouth) and *Just Between Us* (Pan Macmillan). Her work has appeared in numerous literary journals, online and in exhibitions including *Overland, Bumf, Rabbit, Axon: Creative Explorations, Queensland Historical Atlas, Hecate, Verity La, Australian Women’s Book Review, Real Time, Australian Book Review, Art Monthly Australia, Text Journal*. Her artwork is in the collection of the State Library of Queensland. She has a Doctor of Creative Arts from the University of Wollongong, is an associate professor in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, and co-director of the nonfictionLab Research Group and WrICE (Writers Immersion Cultural Exchange). In 2013 she was a writing fellow at the Nonfiction Writing Program in the Department of English at the University of Iowa. She lives in Melbourne. www.francescarendleshort.com
Jill Talbot


Joe Bonomo

Joe Bonomo is the author of numerous books, including *Sweat: The Story of The Fleshtones, America’s Garage Band, Jerry Lee Lewis: Lost and Found*, and, most recently, *This Must Be Where My Obsession With Infinity Began*. He also edited *Conversations With Greil Marcus*. He is an Associate Professor of English at Northern Illinois University and the Music Columnist at *The Normal School*, and appears online at *No Such Thing As Was* (www.nosuchthingaswas.com) and @BonomoJoe.
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