

*A New History of the Essay*



Books by John D'Agata

*Halls of Fame*

*About a Mountain*

*The Lifespan of a Fact*

A NEW HISTORY OF THE ESSAY:

*The Lost Origins of the Essay*

*The Making of the American Essay*

*The Next American Essay*

# A New History of the Essay



*Edited and introduced by*

**JOHN D'AGATA**

*With a foreword by*

**JAMES WOOD**

Graywolf Press

Copyright © 2015 by John D'Agata  
Foreword © 2015 by James Wood

“A Note about the Title” first appeared, in a different form, in *Seneca Review*.

This publication is made possible, in part, by the voters of Minnesota through a Minnesota State Arts Board Operating Support grant, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund, and through a grant from the Wells Fargo Foundation Minnesota. Significant support has also been provided by Target, the McKnight Foundation, Amazon.com, and other generous contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals. To these organizations and individuals we offer our heartfelt thanks.



Published by Graywolf Press  
250 Third Avenue North, Suite 600  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401

All rights reserved.

[www.graywolfpress.org](http://www.graywolfpress.org)

Published in the United States of America

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1  
First Graywolf Printing, 2015

Cover design: Christa Schoenbrodt

*My hope is that myth becomes subservient to my purposes,  
and eventually takes on the semblance of true events. But when it can't,  
when it obstinately slights all attempts at credibility, my wish is for a  
sympathetic reader, someone who is willing to accept with  
indulgence the many varieties of our past.*

PLUTARCH





*The fact is that all writers create their precursors.  
Their work modifies our conception of the past,  
just as it is bound to modify the future.*

BORGES







*An essay is a thing of the imagination.*

OZICK





# Contents

Volume One • *The Lost Origins of the Essay*

Volume Two • *The Making of the American Essay*

Volume Three • *The Next American Essay*

*Foreword*

James Wood

xxxii

*To the Reader*

i

*A Concordance of Modes, Forms, and Themes*

7

*Index of Essays*

33

*Index of Essayists*

37

*Acknowledgments*

41

*A Note about the Title*

43

› Volume One ‹  
*The Lost Origins of the Essay*

*To the Reader*

I

*Prologue*

Ziusudra of Sumer

*The List of Ziusudra*

7

› 1500 B.C.E. ‹

Ennatum of Akkad

*Dialogue of Pessimism*

9

› 500 B.C.E. ‹

Heraclitus of Ephesus

*I Have Looked Diligently at My Own Mind*

15

› 100 B.C.E. ‹

Theophrastus of Eressos

*These Are Them*

21

› 46 ‹

Mestrius Plutarch

*Some Information about the Spartans*

27

› 105 ‹

Lucius Seneca

*Sick*

33

› 315 ‹

Azwinaki Tshipala  
*Questions and Answers*

37

› 427 ‹

T'ao Ch'ien  
*The Biography of Mr. Five-Willows*

41

› 709 ‹

Li Tsung-Yuan  
*Is There a God?*

45

› 858 ‹

Li Shang-yin  
*Miscellany*

49

› 996 ‹

Sei Shōnagon  
*The Pillow Book*

57

› 1281 ‹

Yoshida Kenkō  
*In all things I yearn for the past*

91

› 1336 ‹

Francesco Petrarck  
*My Journey Up the Mountain*

99

› 1499 ‹

Bernardino de Sahagún  
*Definitions of Earthly Things*

107

› 1580 ‹

Michel de Montaigne  
*On Some Verses of Virgil*

113

› 1623 ‹

Francis Bacon  
*Antitheses of Things*

175

› 1658 ‹

Thomas Browne  
*Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial;*  
*or, A Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns Lately Found in Norfolk*

185

› 1692 ‹

Matsuo Bashō  
*Narrow Road to the Interior*

219

› 1729 ‹

Jonathan Swift  
*A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People*  
*in Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country,*  
*and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public*

247

› 1763 ‹

Christopher Smart  
*My Cat Jeoffry*

257

› 1790 ‹

William Blake  
*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

265

▸ 1849 ◀

Thomas De Quincey  
*The English Mail-Coach*  
287

▸ 1860 ◀

Aloysius Bertrand  
*Ondine*  
335

▸ 1869 ◀

Charles Baudelaire  
*Be Drunk*  
339

▸ 1873 ◀

Arthur Rimbaud  
*A Season in Hell*  
343

▸ 1896 ◀

Stéphane Mallarmé  
*A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*  
367

▸ 1907 ◀

Velimir Khlebnikov  
*The I-Singer of Universong*  
391

▸ 1913 ◀

Dino Campana  
*The Night*  
401

▸ 1924 ◀

Saint-John Perse  
*Anabasis*  
413

▸ 1930 ◀

Antonin Artaud  
*Eighteen Seconds*

423

▸ 1935 ◀

Fernando Pessoa  
*Metaphysics has always struck me as a prolonged form of latent insanity*

429

▸ 1941 ◀

Virginia Woolf  
*The Death of the Moth*

445

▸ 1945 ◀

Paul Celan  
*Conversation in the Mountains*

451

▸ 1952 ◀

Francis Ponge  
*The Pebble*

457

▸ 1955 ◀

Edmond Jabès  
*Dread of One Single End*

467

▸ 1957 ◀

Ana Hatherly  
*Tisanes*

475

▸ 1959 ◀

Octavio Paz  
*Before Sleep*

481



▸ 1960 ◀

Marguerite Yourcenar

*Fires*

487

▸ 1962 ◀

Jorge Luis Borges

*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*

503

▸ 1965 ◀

Julio Cortázar

*The Instruction Manual*

519

▸ 1967 ◀

Clarice Lispector

*The Egg and the Chicken*

531

▸ 1968 ◀

Michel Butor

*Egypt*

543

▸ 1969 ◀

Natalia Ginzburg

*He and I*

587

▸ 1970 ◀

Kamau Braithwaite

*Trench Town Rock*

599

▸ 1971 ◀

Peter Handke

*Suggestions for Running Amok*

647

▸ 1972 ◀

Marguerite Duras

*The Atlantic Man*

653

▸ 1973 ◀

Samuel Beckett

*Afar a Bird*

663

▸ 1974 ◀

Lisa Robertson

*Seven Walks*

667

*Epilogue*

John Berger

*What Reconciles Me*

689

- Volume Two -

*The Making of the American Essay*

*To the Reader*

I

*Prologue*

Anonymous

*Creation*

7

- 1630 -

Anne Bradstreet

*For My Dear Son Simon Bradstreet*

9

- 1682 -

Mary Rowlandson

*The Narrative of the Captivity*

15

- 1741 -

Jonathan Edwards

*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*

57

- 1782 -

J. Hector St. John

*On Snakes; and On the Humming-Bird*

77

- 1783 -

Washington Irving

*A History of New York*

87

- 1836 -

Ralph Waldo Emerson

*Nature*

127

- 1841 -

Henry David Thoreau

*Walking*

165

- 1851 -

Herman Melville

*The Whiteness of the Whale*

197

- 1854 -

Edgar Allan Poe

*A Chapter on Autography*

209

- 1858 -

Emily Dickinson

*To Recipient Unknown*

219

- 1865 -

Walt Whitman

*The Weather—Does It Sympathize with These Times?*

225

- 1874 -

William Carlos Williams

*A Matisse*

231

- 1882 -

237

- 1888 -

T. S. Eliot  
*The Dry Salvages*  
241

- 1903 -

W. E. B. Du Bois  
*Of the Coming of John*  
253

- 1909 -

Mark Twain  
*Letters from the Earth*  
269

- 1917 -

Kenneth Goldsmith  
*All the Numbers from Numbers*  
317

- 1921 -

Jean Toomer  
*Blood-Burning Moon*  
341

- 1924 -

Gertrude Stein  
*If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso*  
351

- 1927 -

Laura Riding Jackson  
*In a Café*  
357

- 1934 -

Charles Reznikoff  
*Testimony: The United States*  
361

- 1936 -

F. Scott Fitzgerald  
*The Crack-Up*  
413

- 1939 -

James Agee  
*Brooklyn Is*  
429

- 1940 -

Walter Abish  
*What Else*  
455

- 1941 -

E. B. White  
*Once More to the Lake*  
473

- 1950 -

John Cage  
*Lecture on Nothing*  
481

- 1955 -

Leonard Michaels  
*In the Fifties*  
501

- 1959 -

Lillian Ross  
*The Yellow Bus*  
509

- 1963 -

Norman Mailer  
*Ten Thousand Words a Minute*  
529

- 1963 -

James Baldwin  
*The Fight: Patterson vs. Liston*  
583

- 1964 -

Tom Wolfe  
*The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*  
597

- 1965 -

Gay Talese  
*Frank Sinatra Has a Cold*  
625

- 1968 -

William Gass  
*In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*  
663

- 1969 -

N. Scott Momaday  
*The Way to Rainy Mountain*  
691

- 1970 -

Joe Brainard  
*I Remember*  
715

- 1971 -

Donald Barthelme  
*Sentence*  
745

- 1972 -

Susan Steinberg  
*Signified*  
753

- 1973 -

Renata Adler

*Brownstone*

759

- 1974 -

Kathy Acker

*Humility*

777

*Epilogue*

Harryette Mullen

*Elliptical*

795



▸ Volume Three ◀  
*The Next American Essay*

*To the Reader*

3

*Prologue*

Guy Davenport

*And*

5

▸ 1975 ◀

John McPhee

*The Search for Marvin Gardens*

7

▸ 1976 ◀

Barry Lopez

*The Raven*

21

▸ 1977 ◀

Susan Sontag

*Unguided Tour*

27

▸ 1978 ◀

Jamaica Kincaid

*Girl*

41

▸ 1979 ◀

Joan Didion

*The White Album*

45

▶ 1980 ◀

James Wright  
*May Morning*

75

▶ 1981 ◀

Harry Mathews  
*Country Cooking from Central France: Roast Boned  
Rolled Stuffed Shoulder of Lamb (Farce Double)*

79

▶ 1982 ◀

Annie Dillard  
*Total Eclipse*

95

▶ 1983 ◀

David Antin  
*The Theory and Practice of Postmodernism: A Manifesto*

111

▶ 1984 ◀

Eliot Weinberger  
*The Dream of India*

123

▶ 1985 ◀

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha  
*Erato Love Poetry*

137

▶ 1986 ◀

Dennis Silk  
*The Marionette Theatre*

167

▶ 1987 ◀

Anne Carson  
*Kinds of Water*

181

▶ 1988 ◀

Fabio Morabito  
*Oil*  
219

▶ 1989 ◀

George W. S. Trow  
*Needs*  
225

▶ 1990 ◀

Susan Mitchell  
*Notes Toward a History of Scaffolding*  
231

▶ 1991 ◀

Albert Goldbarth  
*Delft*  
251

▶ 1992 ◀

Paul Metcalf  
*“... and nobody objected”*  
279

▶ October 1992 ◀

Sherman Alexie  
*Captivity*  
293

▶ 1993 ◀

Susan Griffin  
*Red Shoes*  
301

▶ 1994 ◀

Alexander Theroux  
*Black*  
317

▶ 1995 ◀

Lydia Davis  
*Foucault and Pencil*  
333

▶ 1996 ◀

David Shields  
*Life Story*  
337

▶ 1997 ◀

David Foster Wallace  
*Ticket to the Fair*  
343

▶ 1998 ◀

Wayne Koestenbaum  
*Darling's Prick*  
383

▶ 1999 ◀

Carole Maso  
*The Intercession of the Saints*  
391

▶ 2000 ◀

Mary Ruefle  
*Monument*  
407

▶ 2001 ◀

Thalia Field  
*A ∴ I*  
411

▶ 2002 ◀

Brian Lennon  
*Sleep*  
425

► 2003 ◀

Jenny Bouilly

*The Body*

435

*Epilogue*

Joe Wenderoth

*Things To Do Today*

467





JAMES WOOD

Foreword

In his uncontainable book, *Out of Sheer Rage*—a long essay about, around, and through D. H. Lawrence—the English writer Geoff Dyer voices a common complaint about the moribund dominance of the conventional novel. Too many good writers commit themselves to the form of the novel, and then quietly die within its machinery—amidst the contraptions of plot, dialogue, “conflict,” epiphany, resolution, and so on. “Increasingly,” says Dyer, “the process of novelisation goes hand in hand with a strait-jacketing of the material’s expressive potential. One gets so weary watching authors’ sensations and thoughts get novelized, set into the concrete of fiction, that perhaps it is best to avoid the novel as a medium of expression.” Dyer’s own ebullient, borderless work is an example of his liberation from this temptation to “novelize” when one’s natural literary talents lie elsewhere. Dyer is a genre-busting hybrid, and admires the work of like-minded writers, adding that “the novelists I like best are, with the exception of the last-named, not novelists at all: Nietzsche, the Goncourt brothers, Barthes, Fernando Pessoa, Ryszard Kapuscinski, Thomas Bernhard . . .”

If the essay is currently in an excitingly expansive mood, this is partly because it offers both writer and reader an escape from conventional fictional formulae, from dull repetition, from the concrete of “novelization.” (And always has done: ask Pessoa, Barthes, Kapuscinski, Nietzsche.) You might be a lot more eager than Geoff Dyer is to retain the services of the novel as a “means of expression”—I am—and still know exactly what he’s talking about: the novel needs perpetual renovation. But so does the essay. For just as the novel can fall into conventionality, so can the essay. If there is the danger of “novelization,” there is also the danger of “essayization”—where the form

becomes professionalized, smoothed over, a vessel of information rather than of invention, solidly reportorial rather than fleetingly fictive.

For well over a decade now, John D'Agata has been the renovator-in-chief of the American essay. As practitioner and theorist, writer and anthologist, as example and the enabler of examples, D'Agata has refused to yield to the idea of non-fiction as stable, fixed, already formed. (The very term "non-fiction" sends him over the non-fictional cliff.) Instead, he has pushed the essay to yield more of itself, to find within itself an enactment of its own etymology—an essaying, a trying, a perpetual attempt at something (after the French verb *essayer*, to try). He has emphasized that the essay should make, and not merely take; that it should gamble with the fictive and not just trade in the real; that it should entertain uncertainty as often as it hosts opinion; that the essay can be as lyrical, as fragmented, as self-interrupting, and as self-conscious as the most experimental fiction or verse. He wants for the essay what Geoff Dyer wants for the novel—that it be always unfinished, always becoming.

I admire the zeal and intelligence with which John D'Agata has prosecuted his case for a new kind of essay, because he shows so little interest in courting friends or appreciative reviews. He knows that his defense of the fictional element in non-fiction—his emphasis on the sheer amount that we invent when we write what is called "non-fiction"—will rouse the keepers of fact. And of course, I don't mean to mock those keepers, because fact is very precious, even holy, and is not to be taken lightly. Sometimes, I have felt D'Agata to be leaning too emphatically on the side of the fictive and the aesthetic, and in those moments, I hear Robert Lowell's voice, in his poem "Epilogue," reminding himself (and us) that

We are poor passing facts,  
warned by that to give  
each figure in the photograph  
his living name.

But D'Agata, I suspect, might not quarrel with this, and might smilingly remind me that in the same poem, just a few lines earlier, Lowell asks:

Yet why not say what happened?  
Pray for the grace of accuracy



Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination  
stealing like the tide across a map  
to his girl solid with yearning.

Lowell uses “the grace of accuracy” as his definition of “saying what happened,” and chooses not a photograph nor a report as the exemplum of that accuracy, but . . . a painter, Vermeer! *Saying what happened* will take many forms, and the D’Agatean emphasis falls on the saying—on the art involved in the rendering of that “girl solid with yearning.” Suppose that Vermeer used a live model for that girl. Still, what Vermeer *made* of that model is different from the model, and that difference is the very definition of Vermeer’s peculiar grace of accuracy. (As John Berger puts it: “A drawing of a tree shows, not a tree, but a tree being looked at.”)

Making a case for a new kind of essay involves making a case for an old kind of essay that is actually new—or rather, for the perpetual novelty of a certain kind of essay, from (at least) Plutarch to the present day. This task is a grand project, which D’Agata has undertaken through *A New History of the Essay*, a three-volume series of anthologies: *The Next American Essay* (2003), *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (2009), and now *The Making of the American Essay* (2016). “Let the essay be what we make of it,” is D’Agata’s refrain, and his three large anthologies have made good on that promise. They are full of strange new discoveries and exciting re-definitions: can Sei Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book* sit alongside an essay by Montaigne, or Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* alongside Christopher Smart’s poem about his cat? Is Borges an essayist if Theophrastus is also one? Yoshida Kenkō alongside Virginia Woolf? Maybe, the reader thinks, the latest volume should be called *The Unmaking of the American Essay*. That, of course, is the editor’s design: he unmakes the tradition in order to remake it (an American gesture that would be familiar to the Eliot who wrote the essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”). So D’Agata insists on a forceful genealogy of re-creation, a kind of re-creation myth, in which the essay begins, thousands of years ago, with any writing that is prosaic but not strictly informational—a stray Sumerian text, a list of useful (but not uninteresting) advice about the kind of donkey one should buy and the kind of prostitutes one should avoid. The essayistic line continues, in D’Agata’s retelling, through the most diverse places and styles—through Plutarch, Seneca, thirteenth-century Japanese literature, the England of Sir Thomas Browne, the France

of Baudelaire; becomes contemporary with Clarice Lispector and Susan Sontag and Octavio Paz, and up-to-date with Brian Lennon and Mary Ruefle and Kathy Acker.

You might find this fanciful rather than forceful. Sometimes I do. But more often than not, I find myself thinking, in astonishment: “where and how did he find *that* text? And how come it sounds as if it were written yesterday?” That ancient Sumerian text, for instance, the one that starts the ball rolling, the one that gets the whole strange canon firing—tucked into the stuff about donkeys and wells and prostitutes, are single lines like this: “The eyes of the slanderer always move like a spindle.” Or: “For fate, dear friends, is like a wet bank. It is always going to make you slip.” Often, my carefully prepared resistance crumbles: because I enjoy the shrewdness and wit of D’Agata’s editorial writing—the way in which he introduces each essay with his own ludic commentary, sometimes writing directly about his choice, more often than not indirectly; and because he repeatedly forces me to accept the justice of his redefinitions. Plutarch on the customs of the Spartans, for instance, might look like informational prose, or the work of a moralizing historian rather than a D’Agatean essayist; but when D’Agata translates and slightly rearranges the material, Plutarch’s lists of “information” about the Spartans come to resemble a hundred enigmatic little stories:

It is said that when another woman’s son arrived home from a battle with his left arm missing and the stump bleeding terribly in a long trail behind him, she said: “Turn around and follow that back to your courage.”

There are great examples of that persuasive redefining in *The Making of the American Essay*. The eighteenth-century American Protestant minister and theologian Jonathan Edwards would seem to have little to do with Mark Twain; and it seems peculiar to extract T. S. Eliot’s “The Dry Salvages” from *The Four Quartets* and thereby anoint it as an “essay.” But you begin to realize, as you make your way through this book, that the editor is not in search of the essay so much as *the essayistic*, or what you could call the essayistic strain in American writing. And suddenly, under his curating, the essayistic strain begins to seem like *the* American tradition—there it is, in *Moby-Dick* (D’Agata is absolutely right to extract “The Whiteness of the Whale”

from *Moby-Dick*); there it is, in Jonathan Edwards's sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and in T. S. Eliot's sermon-like "The Dry Salvages" (an inspired, radical choice, it turns out, because that poem is the most prosy of all Eliot's verse, and the most sermon-like). Indeed, perhaps the essayistic strain in American writing is really the sermonic strain? (Think of the essayistic preaching, the transcendentalizing, in Saul Bellow, in Ralph Ellison's work, in Marilynne Robinson's fiction.) Melville is always preaching, in both his fiction and his letters, with full-throated gnostic afflatus; Emerson, in his ecstatic work, never stopped being the minister he once was; Washington Irving and Mark Twain are essayistic evangelists of the secular.

And D'Agata notices that along with the American preference for inventing crazily free forms (Melville, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams's prose, Joe Brainard's "I Remember," David Foster Wallace's novella-length essays), there is a long American emphasis on rewriting—on rewriting history, religion, even nature itself; sometimes as parody, sometimes as lament, or as comic lament. Thus in this anthology, Thoreau (who boasts, "If the moon looks larger here than in Europe, probably the sun looks larger also") is in communication with Washington Irving's ironic *A History of New York*; and Mark Twain's sarcastic and parodic creation story (*Letters from the Earth*) is in communication with Emerson's deeply earnest, deeply American essay, "Nature."

In his novella *Seize the Day* (1956), Saul Bellow launches a little sermon—half-serious, half-comic—which, after reading this anthology, comes to seem even more American than it already did: an essayistic preaching, a tryout—an essaying—about the difficulty of making sense of world history amidst the Babel of contemporary Manhattan; thus a making of history and an unmaking of history:

Every other man spoke a language entirely his own, which he had figured out by private thinking; he had his own ideas and peculiar ways. If you wanted to talk about a glass of water, you had to start back with God creating the heavens and earth; the apple; Abraham; Moses and Jesus; Rome; the Middle Ages; gunpowder; the Revolution; back to Newton; up to Einstein; then war and Lenin and Hitler. After reviewing this and getting it all straight again you could proceed to talk about a

glass of water. "I'm fainting, please get me a little water." You were lucky even then to make yourself understood. And this happened over and over and over with everyone you met. You had to translate and translate, explain and explain, back and forth, and it was the punishment of hell itself not to understand or be understood, not to know the crazy from the sane, the wise from the fools, the young from the old or the sick from the well. The fathers were no fathers and the sons no sons. You had to talk with yourself in the daytime and reason with yourself at night. Who else was there to talk to in a city like New York?

Milan Kundera has named the kind of novel he writes "the novelistic essay." But American writing got there way before he did—the novelistic essay, the essayistic novel, the essayistic essay. Call it what you will. The important thing is the making and the unmaking, without cease.



## To the Reader

One day I boarded a train to New York, then a ship to England, then a train to Paris, another to Milan, another to southern Italy, a ferry to southern Greece, a bus to Athens, and a cab for two hours to a little town called Chaeronea, a place so small and insignificant that the only thing that distinguishes it is the overwhelming aroma of white narcissus blooms.

But I didn't come for the blooms.

I came because I once read a book by a turn-of-the-century traveler who said that he got caught in a rainstorm near here and was invited to dry off in the town's monastery, which claimed to possess a chair that had once belonged to Plutarch. I've come because sometimes, when I imagine taking the idea of the essay and stretching it as far back as it can reasonably go—so far back that it starts to look peculiar and new, but not so far back that it becomes unrecognizable—I arrive in the first century in Greece, in Plutarch's hometown, at Plutarch's front door.

Nikolíá, who watches over the monastery for the Greek Orthodox Church, walks across her front yard and greets me with a smile. She says something that I don't understand, but when I pause too long to conjure a response she reaches for me with a hug instead because her English is as bad as my Greek.

"Plutarchos?" she asks.

"Plutarch," I say.

And with that she opens the door.

The Church of the Ascension of the Virgin Mother was built in the fourteenth century, but it was pieced together with parts of a much older building, and with artifacts from ancient local ruins. There are fourth-century

tombstones embedded in the walls, a tenth-century altar screen covered with soot or mold, and a lot of Roman bricks that are grouted into the floor. It's wet inside, and cold, and it's clear that the monastery isn't used much anymore. When that turn-of-the-century traveler stopped here to rest, he noted that local farmers were using the space to dry out heaps of cotton. Today it's filled with bicycles, garbage bags, and a tower of cardboard boxes.

It's hard to imagine Plutarch here. Back in his day, in the first century CE, the people of the Mediterranean had already stopped believing in the gods of antiquity, but they hadn't yet really started to believe in the idea of a Christ. They lived between gods and God, as Gustav Flaubert once described them—a moment in Western history when humans were alone on the earth, and when loneliness inspired wonder. "It is now clear," wrote the historian R. H. Barrow,

that there probably has not been any age in which an interest in philosophy and science, psychology and ethics, was so widespread and so earnestly pursued. Every aspect of religious experience was explored; the emotions were analyzed; science and pseudoscience were eagerly tested; while natural history and exploration exercised fascination.

It was an age of searching, curiosity, longing, and doubt, an age that was primed for a new kind of thinking—one that could translate the ancient world's wisdom into the language of modern uncertainty. The first century isn't when essays were born, but it's when they really found their purpose, and there is no other writer from this period of time who more successfully shaped essays to his own will than Plutarch. Local legend even says that his neighbors called him the Sage of Chaeronea because each spring the tiny town was flooded with young students who came here to study with him.

As I'm looking around, Nikolía starts lifting boxes to get at something underneath. I walk over to grab the last, and as I lift it up she pulls a blanket out from beneath the box, and there, with my body still bent over, I see in front of me a chair.

I look up at Nikolía.

"Plutarchos," she says.

I look down at the chair.

"Really?"

“Yes,” she says. “Thronos.”

Setting down the box, I don't want to understand her Greek. Our word “throne” comes directly from *thronos*, which in Greek means “a seat of distinction.” And even though the Greek can designate anything from a VIP seat in a sports arena to a place setting at the head of a table, Nikolía means it the way that it sounds, because there's nothing utilitarian about this chair. It's an immense piece of veiny stone, a giant block of marble that would have been as impractical in an ancient Greek home as it would be in one today.

“Plutarch?” I ask again.

“Yes! Throne!”

“But . . . so big,” I say.

“Plutarch! Yes!”

Not only is it Plutarch's chair, says Nikolía, but did I notice the big slab of stone that was lying outside the monastery? That, she says, was Plutarch's desk, which is how we know the monastery was built on the site of his house.

What readers have always admired about Plutarch is his humility on the page, his casual knack for getting deep into history, philosophy, or moral predicaments without ever coming across as preachy. We feel, while reading Plutarch, that he's a specialist in subtlety, such that the classicist Moses Hadas once described him as the most charming man in antiquity.

That's why the throne can't possibly be his. We wouldn't want it to be his, would we?

Maybe it comes from the local amphitheater, I think, which is only a few hundred feet away. Dangling in pieces off a nearby cliff, it's merely a crumbling outline of what it used to be. But back in its day, the amphitheater was probably the most glamorous place in town, with a first row that was ringed with luxurious bucket seats—high-backed, ornate, solid marble chairs that would have been reserved for visiting dignitaries, government officials, and anyone who happened to be rich. The monastery's chair looks a lot like the seats that have been saved from similar theaters. And since Greek amphitheaters were often ransacked in the Middle Ages for marble and lime, it's possible that Chaeronea tried to save its own history by carrying the chair into the monastery.

But why save only one?

Is it because there's a chance Plutarch sat in it?

How many seats did the theater once hold, and how many people once

lived in Chaeronea, and how many performances over how many years were scheduled during Plutarch's life? Is there an equation to determine the odds?

Is there a chance that the school that Plutarch ran was moved to the theater to make room for more students, and that this is the chair he used?

What are the chances that someone remembered?

What are the chances that a town would care enough, consistently, for two thousand years, to preserve one chair for us?

What are the chances they were thinking of us?

I don't know what history owes us, but during the past fifteen years I have been thinking a lot about what we might owe to history. When I first started working on these anthologies I was still a graduate student, twenty-five years old, eager and brash, and bothered by the fact that my friends who wrote poetry, fiction, or drama had literary traditions that they could point to, study, show off, and love. I had the notion that if we could create a repository of essays from many different cultures and from throughout literary history we would have an instantaneous heritage of our own. But I know now that's not how it works.

History is only history if it's in contrast with a now. Plutarch was by no means the first writer to make essays, but he so dramatically altered the genre that he'd inherited that it's hard now to see the link between him and those before him. He challenged the conventions of how essays were made. So while his voice might sound genteel and measured to us today, it's that quietness that set him apart. In a culture whose appetite for certainty and answers encouraged writers in Plutarch's day to make bombastic and broad gestures about life and death and fate, Plutarch dared to wander indeterminately in his essays, to inspire instead of instruct, to acknowledge that he didn't have answers. As Michel de Montaigne once wrote,

How variously does Plutarch discourse on the same thing?  
How many times does he present us with two or three incompatible accounts of the causes of something, and divergent arguments, without choosing which one we must follow? How much they say—now with one face, now with another—for those who look at them closely!

We like him because he was modern, a radical in disguise. We like him because his modesty belies an ambition to stand out in a literary crowd.



We shouldn't wonder whether this throne was Plutarch's or not; what we should wonder is how often he sat in it. And when Nikolía leaves me alone for a moment, I close the monastery's door behind her and quickly get my camera set.

As essayists, we don't often encourage each other to be aggressively bold, to go out on literary limbs, to distinguish ourselves from history. We like to say that essays are armchair pursuits—"meditations," "digressions," "considerations," "riffs"—the second-tier efforts of the already resigned. We like to say we write essays in-between our real books, or to make extra money in glossy magazines. We like to say that essays are so insignificant that the critics haven't tainted them with their gobbledygook or theory, and because of this, we like to say, we are all free to write.

And what is it, then, that we write?

What has that freedom brought?

Where have we been, in two thousand years, since Plutarch's revolution?

Isn't the message that we send each other that we ought to make essays cautiously so that we don't get kicked out of the club?

Here's the truth: even after spending fifteen years championing these essayists and what makes them strange, even after crossing the Atlantic on a boat, and Europe on a train, and saving for three years so that I could stand here today, I still feel the pressure of other people's fears that I might be ruining the genre. I still stand and wonder whether I should sit on his throne, or stay where I am, three feet away, and continue to take photos of it empty.

I'm forty years old this year. Does that invitation ever come?

When Nikolía returns to the monastery's dark, she knocks, for some reason, and then hands me a plastic ziplock bag with a dried narcissus bloom.

"For good luck," she says, and hugs me again.

And the cab takes me back to Athens.

In Plutarch's day, the people of Chaeronea believed that because the narcissus was so powerfully fragrant yet fleetingly in bloom its pollen must have possessed a medicinal quality. The town became known for cultivating millions of the blooms each year, extracting its wax, and creating a variety of homebrew treatments for everything from headaches to pregnancy to hearing loss.

Its mythological namesake, Narcissus, was a beautiful young man who rejected all his suitors until he wound up dying, heartbroken and alone,

trying to win the affection of his own image in a pond. Back at my desk at home, whenever I look at the pressed narcissus bloom that Nikolía gave me, I can't help but think that the appeal of seeking a cure in a flower such as this must have depended on the eerie fact that its prettiness conceals a risk: at the root of its name is *narke*—the Greek word for stupor—a nod to the flower's intoxicating scent and the fact that its petals are poisonous.

As the myth of Narcissus tells us, there is no such thing as love in Greece without the risk of heartbreak. No chance for curing ills, either, unless that cure might kill us.

What my trip to Chaeronea taught me is the same thing that the writers in these anthologies have been teaching us for the past four millennia: that you have to take a risk. You have to sit in the throne. You have to push yourself, push your peers, push your readers, push your critics, push your culture, push your forebears, push your instincts and beliefs and fears. You have to be willing to disrupt the history that you are already a part of.

That is what we owe to history: Risk.

And the courage to make the essay our own.





**A Concordance of  
Modes, Forms, and Themes**



# Modes



The truth is, no great essay functions exclusively in a “personal” mode or a “critical” mode, or in any other particular mode of essaying. If it’s ranging broadly, if it’s remaining curious, and if it’s keeping its options open as it bumps into new discoveries, an essay will simultaneously employ multiple modes of exploration.

This can prove challenging for us as readers, of course—like when a personal essay temporarily employs the techniques of journalism, or when a biography occasionally feels as if it’s not about one person but rather an entire culture, or when a travelogue starts to become about a journey happening inside the writer instead of whatever’s going on outside.

When essays slip in and out of these different modes, does one of them trump the other? Should our criteria for evaluating an essay change when it shifts from one mode to another? And what is the point of any modal category if everything can be so fluid?

I believe that the goal of an essay is to give its reader an experience. And in order for that experience to feel genuine, the essay must be more complex than anything that one category could possibly allow. The world is complex, and our lives are complex, and the ways that we experience both ought to be just as complicated, layered, and multidimensional.

These categories are meant to help you begin your own explorations. But I hope that those explorations lead you into territories that would never easily fit into any category.

## Personal

Walter Abish, “What Else”

Kathy Acker, “Humility”

Renata Adler, “Brownstone”

- Donald Barthelme, "Sentence"  
 John Berger, "What Reconciles Me"  
 Jenny Boully, "The Body"  
 Joe Brainard, "I Remember"  
 Dino Campana, "The Night"  
 Lydia Davis, "Foucault and Pencil"  
 Emily Dickinson, "To Recipient Unknown"  
 T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages"  
 Thalia Field, "A ∴ I"  
 F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up"  
 William Gass, "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country"  
 Natalia Ginzburg, "He and I"  
 Albert Goldbarth, "Delft"  
 Edmond Jabès, "Dread of One Single End"  
 Laura Riding Jackson, "In a Café"  
 Yoshido Kenkō, "In all things I yearn for the past"  
 Brian Lennon, "Sleep"  
 N. Scott Momaday, "The Way to Rainy Mountain"  
 Michel de Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil"  
 Octavio Paz, "Before Sleep"  
 Fernando Pessoa, "Metaphysics has always struck me as a prolonged form  
 of latent insanity"  
 Francis Ponge, "The Pebble"  
 Thomas De Quincey, "The English Mail-Coach"  
 Arthur Rimbaud, "A Season in Hell"  
 Mary Ruefle, "Monument"  
 Lucius Seneca, "Sick"  
 Susan Steinberg, "Signified"  
 E. B. White, "Once More To the Lake"  
 Virginia Woolf, "The Death of the Moth"  
 Marguerite Yourcenar, "Fires"

### Biographical

- Samuel Beckett, "Afar a Bird"  
 Joe Brainard, "I Remember"  
 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, "Erato Love Poetry"

Marguerite Duras, "The Atlantic Man"  
Jamaica Kincaid, "Girl"  
Li Shang-yin, "Miscellany"  
Barry Lopez, "The Raven"  
Leonard Michaels, "In the Fifties"  
N. Scott Momaday, "The Way to Rainy Mountain"  
Fabio Morabito, "Oil"  
Mestrius Plutarch, "Some Information about the Spartans"  
Edgar Allan Poe, "A Chapter on Autography"  
J. Hector St. John, "On Snakes; and On the Humming-Bird"  
David Shields, "Life Story"  
Christopher Smart, "My Cat Jeoffry"  
Gertrude Stein, "If I Told Him"  
T'ao Ch'ien, "The Biography of Mr. Five-Willows"  
Gay Talese, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"  
Theophrastus of Eressos, "These Are Them"  
Alexander Theroux, "Black"  
James Wright, "May Morning"

## Travelogue

James Agee, "Brooklyn Is"  
Matsuo Bashō, "Narrow Road to the Interior"  
Michel Butor, "Egypt"  
Anne Carson, "Kinds of Water"  
Annie Dillard, "Total Eclipse"  
Li Tsung-Yuan, "Is There a God?"  
John McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens"  
Harry Mathews, "Country Cooking from Central France"  
Susan Mitchell, "Notes Toward a History of Scaffolding"  
Saint-John Perse, "Anabasis"  
Francesco Petrarca, "My Journey Up the Mountain"  
Lisa Robertson, "Seven Walks"  
Mary Rowlandson, "The Narrative of the Captivity"  
Susan Sontag, "Unguided Tour"  
Henry David Thoreau, "Walking"

## Cultural Observation

Anonymous, "Creation"  
 Sherman Alexie, "Captivity"  
 Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"  
 Kamau Braithwaite, "Trench Town Rock"  
 Thomas Browne, "Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial"  
 Paul Celan, "Conversation in the Mountains"  
 Guy Davenport, "And"  
 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of the Coming of John"  
 Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"  
 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature"  
 Susan Griffin, "Red Shoes"  
 Washington Irving, "A History of New York"  
 Velimir Khlebnikov, "The I-Singer of Universong"  
 Stéphane Mallarmé, "A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance"  
 Herman Melville, "The Whiteness of the Whale"  
 Charles Reznikoff, "Testimony"  
 Bernardino de Sahagún, "Definitions of Earthly Things"  
 Sei Shōnagon, "The Pillow Book"  
 Jean Toomer, "Blood-Burning Moon"  
 George W. S. Trow, "Needs"  
 Azwinaki Tshipala, "Questions and Answers"  
 Mark Twain, "Letters from the Earth"  
 Eliot Weinberger, "The Dream of India"  
 Joe Wenderoth, "Things To Do Today"  
 Ziusudra of Sumer, "The List of Ziusudra"

## Literary Journalism

James Agee, "Brooklyn Is"  
 James Baldwin, "The Fight"  
 Kamau Braithwaite, "Trench Town Rock"  
 Joan Didion, "The White Album"  
 Norman Mailer, "Ten Thousand Words a Minute"  
 Thomas De Quincey, "The English Mail-Coach"  
 Lillian Ross, "The Yellow Bus"



Gay Talese, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"

David Foster Wallace, "Ticket to the Fair"

Tom Wolfe, "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby"

## Criticism

David Antin, "The Theory and Practice of Postmodernism"

Francis Bacon, "Antitheses of Things"

Charles Baudelaire, "Be Drunk"

William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"

Anne Bradstreet, "For My Dear Son Simon Bradstreet"

John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing"

Julio Cortázar, "The Instruction Manual"

Guy Davenport, "And"

Ennatum of Akkad, "Dialogue of Pessimism"

Kenneth Goldsmith, "All the Numbers from Numbers"

Ana Hatherly, "Tisanes"

Heraclitus of Ephesus, "I Have Looked Diligently at My Own Mind"

Wayne Koestenbaum, "Darling's Prick"

Clarice Lispector, "The Egg and the Chicken"

Carole Maso, "The Intercession of the Saints"

Paul Metcalf, ". . . and nobody objected"

Harryette Mullen, "Elliptical"

Dennis Silk, "The Marionette Theatre"

Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal"

Walt Whitman, "The Weather—Does It Sympathize with These Times?"

William Carlos Williams, "A Matisse"



# Forms



The way an essay is structured, sounds, or looks on the page. The way an essay celebrates or challenges literary traditions. The way an author originally conceived of an essay, and the way that essay has subsequently evolved, independent of its author's intentions.

I'm using the term "form" very broadly, in other words. To me, the form of an essay refers to the text's mechanics, the ways in which it affects us, and the tools that it employs to do so.

## Humor or Satire

Some scholars argue that satirical texts are not essays. That might be true—if we believed that essays functioned only as "nonfictions."

But when Jonathan Swift suggests that overpopulation and hunger can be remedied in Ireland by selling poor children to the wealthy as meat, he presents his argument essayistically. It is hyperbolic, and he does not mean what he argues, but the presentation of his argument is nevertheless essayistic. Its genre is immaterial.

Kathy Acker, "Humility"

David Antin, "The Theory and Practice of Postmodernism"

John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing"

Paul Celan, "Conversation in the Mountains"

Ennatum of Akkad, "Dialogue of Pessimism"

Washington Irving, "A History of New York"

Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal"

T'ao Ch'ien, "The Biography of Mr. Five-Willows"

Theophrastus of Eressos, "These Are Them"

George W. S. Trow, "Needs"  
 David Foster Wallace, "Ticket to the Fair"

## Review

Thoughts on books, art, theater, film . . . as well as handwriting, puppets, rocks, etc.

Antonin Artaud, "Eighteen Seconds"  
 Fabio Morabito, "Oil"  
 Edgar Allan Poe, "A Chapter on Autography"  
 Francis Ponge, "The Pebble"  
 Dennis Silk, "The Marionette Theatre"  
 William Carlos Williams, "A Matisse"

## Portraiture

How does the form of a portrait differ from the mode of a biography? A biography is about the other. But an essay that's written in the form of a portrait employs the *conceit* that it is exploring the other—even though it might actually be about something else.

Portraits include profiles of people, examinations of places, descriptions of objects, concepts, and nonhuman entities.

Marguerite Duras, "The Atlantic Man"  
 Laura Riding Jackson, "In a Café"  
 Li Shang-yin, "Miscellany"  
 Paul Metcalf, ". . . and nobody objected"  
 Mestrius Plutarch, "Some Information about the Spartans"  
 Francis Ponge, "The Pebble"  
 J. Hector St. John, "On Snakes; and On the Humming-Bird"  
 Christopher Smart, "My Cat Geoffry"  
 Gertrude Stein, "If I Told Him"  
 T'ao Ch'ien, "The Biography of Mr. Five-Willows"  
 Gay Talese, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"  
 Theophrastus of Eressos, "These Are Them"  
 Alexander Theroux, "Black"

Eliot Weinberger, "The Dream of India"

Tom Wolfe, "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby"

## Observation

Essays that gather material through experience, create meaning through ekphrasis, and make assertions by inference.

Ana Hatherly, "Tisanes"

Velimir Khlebnikov, "The I-Singer of Universong"

Li Tsung-Yuan, "Is There a God?"

Barry Lopez, "The Raven"

Fabio Morabito, "Oil"

Lillian Ross, "The Yellow Bus"

J. Hector St. John, "On Snakes; and On the Humming-Bird"

Gay Talese, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"

Walt Whitman, "The Weather—Does it Sympathize with These Times?"

## Cataloguing

Essays that employ lists or structural repetitions in order to build a sense of unifying significance out of seemingly disparate parts.

Anonymous, "Creation"

Ennatum of Akkad, "Dialogue of Pessimism"

William Gass, "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country"

Natalia Ginzburg, "He and I"

Jamaica Kincaid, "Girl"

Li Shang-yin, "Miscellany"

Carole Maso, "The Intercession of the Saints"

Bernardino de Sahagún, "Definitions of Earthly Things"

David Shields, "Life Story"

Theophrastus of Eressos, "These Are Them"

Alexander Theroux, "Black"

Eliot Weinberger, "The Dream of India"

Joe Wenderoth, "Things To Do Today"

Ziusudra of Sumer, "The List of Ziusudra"

## Description

Essays that are heavily image-based, and in which we find meaning in their accumulations of detail.

Anonymous, "Creation"

Antonin Artaud, "Eighteen Seconds"

John Berger, "What Reconciles Me"

Michel Butor, "Egypt"

Lydia Davis, "Foucault and Pencil"

W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of the Coming of John"

Susan Mitchell, "Notes Toward a History of Scaffolding"

Thomas De Quincey, "The English Mail-Coach"

Jean Toomer, "Blood-Burning Moon"

David Foster Wallace, "Ticket to the Fair"

## Aphoristic

Essays that employ proverbs or have a scriptural vibe.

Francis Bacon, "Antitheses of Things"

William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"

Anne Bradstreet, "For My Dear Son Simon Bradstreet"

Heraclitus of Ephesus, "I Have Looked Diligently at My Own Mind"

Edmond Jabès, "Dread of One Single End"

David Shields, "Life Story"

Ziusudra of Sumer, "The List of Ziusudra"

## Multiple Voices

Essays that are polyphonic, employing a multitude of voices—sometimes coming from one person, sometimes from more than one.

Walter Abish, "What Else"

Jenny Boully, "The Body"

Kamau Braithwaite, "Trench Town Rock"

Paul Celan, "Conversation in the Mountains"

Thalia Field, "A ∴ I"  
Susan Griffin, "Red Shoes"  
Peter Handke, "Suggestions for Running Amok"  
Paul Metcalf, ". . . and nobody objected"  
N. Scott Momaday, "The Way to Rainy Mountain"  
Harrvette Mullen, "Elliptical"  
Bernardino de Sahagún, "Definitions of Earthly Things"  
David Shields, "Life Story"  
Susan Sontag, "Unguided Tour"  
Azwinaki Tshipala, "Questions and Answers"  
Mark Twain, "Letters from the Earth"  
Eliot Weinberger, "The Dream of India"  
Marguerite Yourcenar, "Fires"

## **Epistolary**

Essays that might have historically originated as letters but which we've now inherited as literature. Or, essays that are simply employing the conceit of a letter in order to create the illusion that we are privy to intimate exchanges and revelations.

Emily Dickinson, "To Recipient Unknown"  
J. Hector St. John, "On Snakes; and On the Humming-Bird"  
Lucius Seneca, "Sick"  
Susan Sontag, "Unguided Tour"  
Mark Twain, "Letters from the Earth"

## **Journal or Diary**

Like epistolary essays, these texts are structured like journal entries. Or at least they feel as if their intended audience is the speaker him or herself.

James Agee, "Brooklyn Is"  
Joe Brainard, "I Remember"  
Yoshida Kenkō, "In all things I yearn for the past"  
Lisa Robertson, "Seven Walks"

Mary Rowlandson, "The Narrative of the Captivity"  
 Sei Shōnagon, "The Pillow Book"

### Book-Length

These essays were conceived and originally published as book-length projects. Some of them may be presented here only as excerpts, however.

Matsuo Bashō, "Narrow Road to the Interior"  
 William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"  
 Jenny Boully, "The Body"  
 Joe Brainard, "I Remember"  
 Kamau Braithwaite, "Trench Town Rock"  
 N. Scott Momaday, "The Way to Rainy Mountain"  
 Charles Reznikoff, "Testimony"  
 Mary Rowlandson, "The Narrative of the Captivity"  
 Sei Shōnagon, "The Pillow Book"

### Hybrid: Poetry

Essays that originated as poems but are reframed here as essays. Or, essays that were always meant to be essays, but that intentionally and conspicuously employ poetic techniques.

Sherman Alexie, "Captivity"  
 Matsuo Bashō, "Narrow Road to the Interior"  
 Charles Baudelaire, "Be Drunk"  
 Aloysius Bertrand, "Ondine"  
 William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"  
 Dino Campana, "The Night"  
 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, "Erato Love Poetry"  
 T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages"  
 Velimir Khlebnikov, "The I-Singer of Universong"  
 Stéphane Mallarmé, "A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance"  
 Saint-John Perse, "Anabasis"  
 Charles Reznikoff, "Testimony"  
 Arthur Rimbaud, "A Season in Hell"



Christopher Smart, "My Cat Jeoffry"  
Jean Toomer, "Blood-Burning Moon"  
James Wright, "May Morning"

### **Hybrid: Fiction**

Essays that originated as stories but are reframed here as essays. Or, essays that were always meant to be essays, but that intentionally and conspicuously employ fiction techniques.

Renata Adler, "Brownstone"  
Antonin Artaud, "Eighteen Seconds"  
Donald Barthelme, "Sentence"  
Samuel Beckett, "Afar a Bird"  
W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of the Coming of John"  
Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"  
Jamaica Kincaid, "Girl"  
Herman Melville, "The Whiteness of the Whale"  
J. Hector St. John, "On Snakes; and On the Humming-Bird"  
Susan Sontag, "Unguided Tour"  
Susan Steinberg, "Signified"  
Margeurite Yourcenar, "Fires"

### **Collage and Found**

Essays that redeploy and rearrange appropriated language in order to create new ideas, new arguments, new texts.

Walter Abish, "What Else"  
Kamau Braithwaite, "Trench Town Rock"  
Kenneth Goldsmith, "All the Numbers from Numbers"  
Paul Metcalf, ". . . and nobody objected"  
Mestrius Plutarch, "Some Information about the Spartans"  
Charles Reznikoff, "Testimony"  
Bernardino de Sahagún, "Definitions of Earthly Things"  
David Shields, "Life Story"

## Instruction

Essays that make use of the imperative mood, and the conceit of sharing information for instructional purposes.

John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing"  
 Julio Cortázar, "The Instruction Manual"  
 Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"  
 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature"  
 Jamaica Kincaid, "Girl"  
 Harry Mathews, "Country Cooking from Central France"  
 Bernardino de Sahugún, "Definitions of Earthly Things"  
 Ziusudra of Sumer, "The List of Ziusudra"

## Meditation

Essays that consider their subjects by moving processionally or associatively toward explication.

Kathy Acker, "Humility"  
 James Agee, "Brooklyn Is"  
 James Baldwin, "The Fight"  
 Donald Barthelme, "Sentence"  
 Thomas Browne, "Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial"  
 Annie Dillard, "Total Eclipse"  
 Wayne Koestenbaum, "Darling's Prick"  
 Clarice Lispector, "The Egg and the Chicken"  
 Norman Mailer, "Ten Thousand Words a Minute"  
 Herman Melville, "The Whiteness of the Whale"  
 Michel de Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil"  
 Fernando Pessoa, "Metaphysics has always struck me as a prolonged form  
 of latent insanity"  
 Thomas De Quincey, "The English Mail-Coach"  
 Henry David Thoreau, "Walking"  
 E. B. White, "Once More to the Lake"  
 Walt Whitman, "The Weather—Does it Sympathize with These Times?"  
 Virginia Woolf, "The Death of the Moth"  
 Marguerite Yourcenar, "Fires"

## Graphic

How these essays look on the page plays a big role in how we interpret them.

Francis Bacon, “Antitheses of Things”  
 Jenny Boully, “The Body”  
 Kamau Braithwaite, “Trench Town Rock”  
 John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing”  
 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, “Erato Love Poetry”  
 Kenneth Goldsmith, “All the Numbers from Numbers”  
 Brian Lennon, “Sleep”  
 Stéphane Mallarmé, “A Roll of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance”  
 Edgar Allan Poe, “A Chapter on Autography”  
 Mary Ruefle, “Monument”  
 Gertrude Stein, “If I Told Him”

## Sectioning

Essays that rely on sequences or an accretion of fragments in order to create their narratives.

Renata Adler, “Brownstone”  
 Matsuo Bashō, “Narrow Road to the Interior”  
 Anne Carson, “Kinds of Water”  
 Joan Didion, “The White Album”  
 F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up”  
 Brian Lennon, “Sleep”  
 John McPhee, “The Search for Marvin Gardens”  
 Leonard Michael, “In the Fifties”  
 N. Scott Momaday, “The Way to Rainy Mountain”  
 Fernando Pessoa, “Metaphysics has always struck me as a prolonged form  
 of latent insanity”  
 Mestrius Plutarch, “Some Information about the Spartans”  
 Lisa Robertson, “Seven Walks”  
 Mary Rowlandson, “The Narrative of the Captivity”  
 Sei Shonagōn, “The Pillow Book”  
 Eliot Weinberger, “The Dream of India”  
 Marguerite Yourcenar, “Fires”

## Interior Monologue

Essays that rely on an elliptical stream of consciousness in order to create their narratives.

James Agee, "Brooklyn Is"

Donald Barthelme, "Sentence"

Michel Butor, "Egypt"

Marguerite Duras, "The Atlantic Man"

Albert Goldbarth, "Delft"

Octavio Paz, "Before Sleep"

Francesco Petrarca, "My Journey Up the Mountain"

Mary Ruefle, "Monument"

Susan Steinberg, "Signified"

## Pseudonym

Sometimes the fact that we know an essay was written under a pseudonym affects how we read it—especially if we only learn about that pseudonym after the fact.

Washington Irving, "A History of New York"

Saint-Jean Perse, "Anabasis"

Fernando Pessoa, "Metaphysics has always struck me as a prolonged form  
of latent insanity"

J. Hector St. John, "On Snakes; and On the Humming-Bird"

Mark Twain, "Letters from the Earth"

## Themes (*and some Subjects*)



When booksellers shelve nonfiction books under banners that proclaim what they're "about"—Marriage, Sports, Travel, etc.—they limit how we experience them. After all, we find fiction under "Fiction" and poetry under "Poetry," but if we want to find Annie Dillard it's not so simple a search. We probably have to look under "Nature" or "Religion" or sometimes "Autobiography." We are encouraged to start interpreting her book before it's even in our hands, and before Dillard's imagination can cast its spell on us.

To experience literature is to experience surprise. It's to find ourselves in unexpected terrain—sometimes discomfortingly, sometimes exhilaratingly. Yet when we are told what we will experience in a book before we're even able to undergo that experience, something mortal befalls our relationship with that book, and the magic of discovery is lost.

Let's do away with those banners in bookstores therefore, and the subtitles on the covers of "nonfiction" books, and pages 25–32 in this booklet while we're at it (just as long as you own this copy).

### The Quotidian

Renata Adler, "Brownstone"

David Antin, "The Theory and Practice of Postmodernism"

Joe Brainard, "I Remember"

Julio Cortázar, "The Instruction Manual"

Lydia Davis, "Foucault and Pencil"

Albert Goldbarth, "Delft"

Li Shang-yin, "Miscellany"

Gay Talese, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"

Ziusudra of Sumer, "The List of Ziusudra"

## Contemporary Life

- Walter Abish, "What Else"  
 David Antin, "The Theory and Practice of Postmodernism"  
 Joan Didion, "The White Album"  
 T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages"  
 F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up"  
 Peter Handke, "Suggestions for Running Amok"  
 Stéphane Mallarmé, "A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance"  
 John McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens"  
 Thomas De Quincey, "The English Mail-Coach"  
 David Shields, "Life Story"  
 Sei Shōnagon, "The Pillow Book"  
 Susan Steinberg, "Signified"  
 George W. S. Trow, "Needs"  
 Joe Wenderoth, "Things to Do Today"  
 Walt Whitman, "The Weather—Does It Sympathize with These Times?"  
 Ziusudra of Sumer, "The List of Ziusudra"

## Death

- Samuel Beckett, "Afar a Bird"  
 John Berger, "What Reconciles Me"  
 Thomas Browne, "Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial"  
 Joan Didion, "The White Album"  
 Edmond Jabès, "Dread of One Single End"  
 Herman Melville, "The Whiteness of the Whale"  
 Thomas De Quincey, "The English Mail-Coach"  
 Arthur Rimbaud, "A Season in Hell"  
 Alexander Theroux, "Black"  
 E. B. White, "Once More to the Lake"  
 Virginia Woolf, "The Death of a Moth"  
 James Wright, "May Morning"

## Philosophy

- Thomas Browne, "Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial"  
 Paul Celan, "Conversation in the Mountains"

Heraclitus of Ephesus, "I Have Looked Diligently at My Own Mind"  
Li Tsung-Yuan, "Is There a God?"  
Fabio Morabito, "Oil"  
Fernando Pessoa, "Metaphysics has always struck me as a prolonged form  
of latent insanity"  
Francesco Petrarck, "My Journey Up the Mountain"  
Mark Twain, "Letters from the Earth"

## **Art**

Antonin Artaud, "Eighteen Seconds"  
Donald Barthelme, "Sentence"  
Matsuo Bashō, "Narrow Road to the Interior"  
Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"  
John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing"  
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, "Erato Love Poetry"  
Guy Davenport, "And"  
Laura Riding Jackson, "In a Café"  
Wayne Koestenbaum, "Darling's Prick"  
Susan Mitchell, "Notes Toward a History of Scaffolding"  
Edgar Allan Poe, "A Chapter on Autography"  
Dennis Silk, "The Marionette Theatre"  
Gertrude Stein, "If I Told Him"  
William Carlos Williams, "A Matisse"

## **Alcohol or Drugs**

Charles Baudelaire, "Be Drunk"  
Thomas De Quincey, "The English Mail-Coach"

## **Mythology**

Anonymous, "Creation"  
Aloysius Bertrand, "Ondine"  
N. Scott Momaday, "The Way to Rainy Mountain"  
Azwinaki Tshipala, "Questions and Answers"  
Marguerite Yourcenar, "Fires"

## Illness

F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up"

Lucius Seneca, "Sick"

## Crime

Renata Adler, "Brownstone"

Kamau Braithwaite, "Trench Town Rock"

Joan Didion, "The White Album"

Peter Handke, "Suggestions for Running Amok"

Paul Metcalf, ". . . and nobody objected"

Jean Toomer, "Blood-Burning Moon"

## Nostalgia

Joe Brainard, "I Remember"

Michel Butor, "Egypt"

Washington Irving, "A History of New York"

Yoshida Kenkō, "In all things I yearn for the past"

John McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens"

Leonard Michaels, "In the Fifties"

Sei Shōnagon, "The Pillow Book"

E. B. White, "Once More to the Lake"

## Food

Ana Hatherly, "Tisanes"

Harry Mathews, "Country Cooking from Central France"

## Nature

Matsuo Bashō, "Narrow Road to the Interior"

Paul Celan, "Conversation in the Mountains"

Annie Dillard, "Total Eclipse"

T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages"

Barry Lopez, "The Raven"



Francesco Petrarch, "My Journey Up the Mountain"  
Francis Ponge, "The Pebble"  
Bernardino de Sahagún, "Definitions of Earthly Things"  
J. Hector St. John, "On Snakes; and On the Humming-Bird"  
Henry David Thoreau, "Walking"  
James Wright, "May Morning"

## **Animals**

Aloysius Bertrand, "Ondine"  
Albert Goldbarth, "Delft"  
Sei Shōnagon, "The Pillow Book"  
Christopher Smart, "My Cat Jeoffry"

## **Relationships**

Aloysius Bertrand, "Ondine"  
Jenny Boully, "The Body"  
Dino Campana, "The Night"  
Anne Carson, "Kinds of Water"  
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, "Erato Love Poetry"  
Emily Dickinson, "To Recipient Unknown"  
Marguerite Duras, "The Atlantic Man"  
Thalia Field, "A ∴ I"  
Natalia Ginzburg, "He and I"  
Jamaica Kincaid, "Girl"  
Wayne Koestenbaum, "Darling's Prick"  
Michel de Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil"  
Francesco Petrarch, "My Journey Up the Mountain"  
Mestrius Plutarch, "Some Information about the Spartans"  
Mary Ruefle, "Monument"  
Christopher Smart, "My Cat Jeoffry"  
Susan Sontag, "Unguided Tour"  
Susan Steinberg, "Signified"  
Azwinaki Tshipala, "Questions and Answers"  
Marguerite Yourcenar, "Fires"

## Dream or Fantasy

Aloysius Bertrand, "Ondine"  
 Dino Campana, "The Night"  
 Velimir Khlebnikov, "The I-Singer of Universong"  
 Thomas De Quincey, "The English Mail-Coach"  
 Arthur Rimbaud, "A Season in Hell"  
 Eliot Weinberger, "The Dream of India"

## Politics

Kathy Acker, "Humility"  
 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of the Coming of John"  
 Charles Reznikoff, "Testimony"  
 Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal"  
 Jean Toomer, "Blood-Burning Moon"

## Opposition

Kathy Acker, "Humility"  
 Francis Bacon, "Antitheses of Things"  
 William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"  
 Ennatum of Akkad, "Dialogue of Pessimism"  
 Clarice Lispector, "The Egg and the Chicken"  
 Harriette Mullen, "Elliptical"  
 Mark Twain, "Letters from the Earth"

## Faith

William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"  
 Anne Carson, "Kinds of Water"  
 Annie Dillard, "Total Eclipse"  
 Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"  
 T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages"  
 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature"  
 Carole Maso, "The Intercession of the Saints"  
 Octavio Paz, "Before Sleep"  
 Saint-Jean Perse, "Anabasis"

Mary Rowlandson, "The Narrative of the Captivity"  
Christopher Smart, "My Cat Jeoffry"  
T'ao Ch'ien, "The Biography of Mr. Five-Willows"  
Mark Twain, "Letters from the Earth"

## **Advice**

Anne Bradstreet, "For My Dear Son Simon Bradstreet"  
Jamaica Kincaid, "Girl"  
Ziusudra of Sumer, "The List of Ziusudra"

## **Place**

James Agee, "Brooklyn Is"  
Michel Butor, "Egypt"  
Joan Didion, "The White Album"  
William Gass, "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country"  
Barry Lopez, "The Raven"  
John McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens"  
Mestrius Plutarch, "Some Information about the Spartans"  
Lisa Robertson, "Seven Walks"  
David Foster Wallace, "Ticket to the Fair"  
Eliot Weinberger, "The Dream of India"  
William Carlos Williams, "A Matisse"

## **Spectacle**

Antonin Artaud, "Eighteen Seconds"  
James Baldwin, "The Fight"  
Peter Handke, "Suggestions for Running Amok"  
Norman Mailer, "Ten Thousand Words a Minute"  
William Carlos Williams, "A Matisse"  
Tom Wolfe, "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby"

## **City Life**

Renata Adler, "Brownstone"  
James Agee, "Brooklyn Is"

Peter Handke, "Suggestions for Running Amok"

Brian Lennon, "Sleep"

John McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens"

Lisa Robertson, "Seven Walks"

Lillian Ross, "The Yellow Bus"

### Rural Life

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature"

William Gass, "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country"

J. Hector St. John, "On Snakes; and On the Humming-Bird"

T'ao Ch'ien, "The Biography of Mr. Five-Willows"

Henry David Thoreau, "Walking"

David Foster Wallace, "Ticket to the Fair"

### Justice

Sherman Alexie, "Captivity"

W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of the Coming of John"

Susan Griffin, "Red Shoes"

Charles Reznikoff, "Testimony"

### Grievance

Marguerite Duras, "The Atlantic Man"

Harryette Mullen, "Elliptical"

Sei Shōnagon, "The Pillow Book"

Theophrastus of Eressos, "These Are Them"

## Index of Essays

*The Lost Origins of the Essay* (L)

*The Making of the American Essay* (M)

*The Next American Essay* (N)

- A ∴ I, THALIA FIELD, N411  
Afar a Bird, SAMUEL BECKETT, L663  
All the Numbers from Numbers, KENNETH GOLDSMITH, M317  
Anabasis, SAINT-JOHN PERSE, L413  
And, GUY DAVENPORT, N5  
“ . . . and nobody objected,” PAUL METCALE, N279  
Antitheses of Things, FRANCIS BACON, L175  
Atlantic Man, The, MARGUERITE DURAS, L653  
Be Drunk, CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, L339  
Before Sleep, OCTAVIO PAZ, L481  
Biography of Mr. Five-Willows, The, T’AO CH’IEN, L41  
Black, ALEXANDER THEROUX, N317  
Blood-Burning Moon, JEAN TOOMER, M341  
Body, The, JENNY BOULLY, N435  
Brooklyn Is, JAMES AGEE, M429  
Brownstone, RENATA ADLER, M759  
Captivity, SHERMAN ALEXIE, N293  
Chapter on Autography, A, EDGAR ALLAN POE, M209  
Conversation in the Mountains, PAUL CELAN, L451  
Country Cooking from Central France, HARRY MATHEWS, N79  
Crack-Up, The, F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, M413  
Creation, ANONYMOUS, M7  
Darling’s Prick, WAYNE KOESTENBAUM, N383  
Death of the Moth, The, VIRGINIA WOOLF, L445  
Definitions of Earthly Things, BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN, L107  
Delft, ALBERT GOLDBARTH, N251  
Dialogue of Pessimism, ENNATUM OF AKKAD, L9  
Dread of One Single End, EDMOND JABÈS, L467  
Dream of India, The, ELIOT WEINBERGER, N123

- Dry Salvages, The, T. S. ELIOT, M241  
 Egg and the Chicken, The, CLARICE LISPECTOR, L531  
 Egypt, MICHEL BUTOR, L543  
 Eighteen Seconds, ANTONIN ARTAUD, L423  
 Elliptical, HARRYETTE MULLEN, M795  
 English Mail-Coach, The, THOMAS DE QUINCEY, L287  
 Erato Love Poetry, THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA, N137  
 Fight, The, JAMES BALDWIN, M583  
 Fires, MARGUERITE YOURCENAR, L487  
 For My Dear Son Simon Bradstreet, ANNE BRADSTREET, M9  
 Foucault and Pencil, LYDIA DAVIS, N333  
 Frank Sinatra Has a Cold, GAY TALESE, M625  
 Girl, JAMAICA KINCAID, N41  
 He and I, NATALIA GINZBURG, L587  
 History of New York, A, WASHINGTON IRVING, M87  
 Humility, KATHY ACKER, M777  
 Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial, THOMAS BROWNE, L185  
 I Have Looked Diligently at My Own Mind, HERACLITUS OF EPHESUS, L15  
 I Remember, JOE BRAINARD, M715  
 I-Singer of Universong, The, VELIMIR KHLEBNIKOV, L391  
 If I Told Him, GERTRUDE STEIN, M351  
 In a Café, LAURA RIDING JACKSON, M357  
 In all things I yearn for the past, YOSHIDA KENKŌ, L91  
 In the Fifties, LEONARD MICHAELS, M501  
 In the Heart of the Heart of the Country, WILLIAM GASS, M663  
 Instruction Manual, The, JULIO CORTÁZAR, L519  
 Intercession of the Saints, The, CAROLE MASO, N391  
 Is There a God?, LI TSUNG-YUAN, L45  
 Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby, The, TOM WOLFE, M597  
 Kinds of Water, ANNE CARSON, N181  
 Lecture on Nothing, JOHN CAGE, M481  
 Letters from the Earth, MARK TWAIN, M269  
 Life Story, DAVID SHIELDS, N337  
 List of Ziusudra, The, ZIUSUDRA OF SUMER, L7  
 Marionette Theatre, The, DENNIS SILK, N167  
 Marriage of Heaven and Hell, The, WILLIAM BLAKE, L265  
 Matisse, A, WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, M231  
 May Morning, JAMES WRIGHT, N75  
 Metaphysics has always struck me as a prolonged form of latent insanity,  
 FERNANDO PESSOA, L429

- Miscellany, LI SHANG-YIN, L49  
Modest Proposal, A, JONATHAN SWIFT, L247  
Monument, MARY RUEFLE, N407  
My Cat Jeffery, CHRISTOPHER SMART, L257  
My Journey Up the Mountain, FRANCESCO PETRARCH, L99  
Narrative of the Captivity, The, MARY ROWLANDSON, M15  
Narrow Road to the Interior, MATSUO BASHŌ, L219  
Nature, RALPH WALDO EMERSON, M127  
Needs, GEORGE W. S. TROW, N225  
Night, The, DINO CAMPANA, L401  
Notes Toward a History of Scaffolding, SUSAN MITCHELL, N231  
Of the Coming of John, W. E. B. DU BOIS, M253  
Oil, FABIO MORABITO, N219  
On Snakes; and On the Humming-Bird, J. HECTOR ST. JOHN, M77  
On Some Verses of Virgil, MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, L113  
Once More to the Lake, E. B. WHITE, M473  
Ondine, ALOYSIUS BERTRAND, L335  
Pebble, The, FRANCIS PONGE, L457  
Pillow Book, The, SEI SHŌNAGON, L57  
Questions and Answers, AZWINAKI TSHIPALA, L37  
Raven, The, BARRY LOPEZ, N21  
Red Shoes, SUSAN GRIFFIN, N301  
Search for Marvin Gardens, The, JOHN MCPHEE, N7  
Season in Hell, A, ARTHUR RIMBAUD, L343  
Sentence, DONALD BARTHELME, M745  
Seven Walks, LISA ROBERTSON, L667  
Sick, LUCIUS SENECA, L33  
Signified, SUSAN STEINBERG, M753  
Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, JONATHAN EDWARDS, M57  
Sleep, BRIAN LENNON, N425  
Some Information about the Spartans, MESTRIUS PLUTARCH, L27  
Suggestions for Running Amok, PETER HANDKE, L647  
Ten Thousand Words a Minute, NORMAN MAILER, M529  
Testimony, CHARLES REZNIKOFF, M361  
Theory and Practice of Postmodernism, The, DAVID ANTIN, N111  
These Are Them, THEOPHRASTUS OF ERESSOS, L21  
Things To Do Today, JOE WENDEROTH, N467  
Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance, A, STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ, L367  
Ticket to the Fair, DAVID FOSTER WALLACE, N343  
Tisanes, ANA HATHERLY, L475

- Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius, JORGE LUIS BORGES, L503  
To Recipient Unknown, EMILY DICKINSON, M221  
Total Eclipse, ANNIE DILLARD, N95  
Trench Town Rock, KAMAU BRAITHWAITE, L599  
Unguided Tour, SUSAN SONTAG, N27  
Walking, HENRY DAVID THOREAU, M165  
Way to Rainy Mountain, The, N. SCOTT MOMADAY, M691  
Weather—Does It Sympathize with These Times?, The, WALT WHITMAN, M225  
What Else, WALTER ABISH, M455  
What Reconciles Me, JOHN BERGER, L689  
White Album, The, JOAN DIDION, N45  
Whiteness of the Whale, The, HERMAN MELVILLE, M197  
Yellow Bus, The, LILLIAN ROSS, M509



## Index of Essayists

*The Lost Origins of the Essay* (L)

*The Making of the American Essay* (M)

*The Next American Essay* (N)

ABISH, WALTER, M455  
ACKER, KATHY, M777  
ADLER, RENATA, M759  
AGEE, JAMES, M429  
ALEXIE, SHERMAN, N293  
ANTIN, DAVID, N111  
ANONYMOUS, M7  
ARTAUD, ANTONIN, L423  
BACON, FRANCIS, L175  
BALDWIN, JAMES, M583  
BARTHELME, DONALD, M745  
BASHŌ, MATSUO, L219  
BAUDELAIRE, CHARLES, L339  
BECKETT, SAMUEL, L663  
BERGER, JOHN, L689  
BERTRAND, ALOYSIUS, L335  
BLAKE, WILLIAM, L265  
BORGES, JORGE LUIS, L503  
BOULLY, JENNY, N435  
BRADSTREET, ANNE, M9  
BRAINARD, JOE, M715  
BRAITHWAITE, KAMAU, L599  
BROWNE, THOMAS, L185  
BUTOR, MICHEL, L543  
CAGE, JOHN, M481  
CAMPANA, DINO, L401  
CARSON, ANNE, N181  
CELAN, PAUL, L451  
CHA, THERESA HAK KYUNG, N137

CORTÁZAR, JULIO, L519  
DAVENPORT, GUY, N5  
DAVIS, LYDIA, N333  
DICKINSON, EMILY, M219  
DIDION, JOAN, N45  
DILLARD, ANNIE N95  
DU BOIS, W. E. B., M253  
DURAS, MARGUERITE, L653  
EDWARDS, JONATHAN, M57  
ELIOT, T. S., M241  
EMERSON, RALPH WALDO, M127  
ENNATUM OF AKKAD, L9  
FIELD, THALIA, N411  
FITZGERALD, F. SCOTT, M413  
GASS, WILLIAM, M663  
GINZBURG, NATALIA, L587  
GOLDBARTH, ALBERT, N251  
GOLDSMITH, KENNETH, M317  
GRIFFIN, SUSAN, N301  
HANDKE, PETER, L647  
HATHERLY, ANA, L475  
HERACLITUS OF EPHESUS, L15  
IRVING, WASHINGTON, M87  
JABÈS, EDMOND, L467  
JACKSON, LAURA RIDING, M357  
KENKŌ, YOSHIDA, L91  
KHLEBNIKOV, VELIMIR, L391  
KINCAID, JAMAICA, N41  
KOESTENBAUM, WAYNE, N383  
LENNON, BRIAN, N425  
LI SHANG-YIN, L49  
LI TSUNG-YUAN, L45  
LISPECTOR, CLARICE, L531  
LOPEZ, BARRY, N21  
MAILER, NORMAN, M529  
MALLARMÉ, STÉPHANE, L367  
MASO, CAROLE, N391  
MATHEWS, HARRY, N79  
MCPHEE, JOHN, N7  
MELVILLE, HERMAN, M197

METCALF, PAUL, N279  
MICHAELS, LEONARD, M501  
MITCHELL, SUSAN, N231  
MOMADAY, N. SCOTT, M691  
MONTAIGNE, MICHEL DE, L113  
MORABITO, FABIO, N219  
MULLEN, HARRYETTE, M795  
PAZ, OCTAVIO, L481  
PERSE, SAINT-JOHN, L413  
PESSOA, FERNANDO, L429  
PETRARCH, FRANCESCO, L99  
PLUTARCH, MESTRIUS, L27  
POE, EDGAR ALLAN, M209  
PONGE, FRANCIS, L457  
QUINCEY, THOMAS DE, L287  
REZNIKOFF, CHARLES, M361  
RIMBAUD, ARTHUR, L343  
ROBERTSON, LISA, L667  
ROSS, LILLIAN, M509  
ROWLANDSON, MARY, M15  
RUEFLE, MARY, N407  
SAHAGÚN, BERNARDINO DE, L107  
ST. JOHN, J. HECTOR, M77  
SENECA, LUCIUS, L33  
SHIELDS, DAVID, N337  
SHÖNAGON, SEI, L57  
SILK, DENNIS, N167  
SMART, CHRISTOPHER, L257  
SONTAG, SUSAN, N27  
STEIN, GERTRUDE, M351  
STEINBERG, SUSAN, M753  
SWIFT, JONATHAN, L247  
TALESE, GAY, M625  
T'AO CH' IEN, L41  
THEOPHRASTUS OF ERESSOS, L21  
THEROUX, ALEXANDER, N317  
THOREAU, HENRY DAVID, M165  
TOOMER, JEAN, M341  
TROW, GEORGE W. S., N225  
TSHIPALA, AZWINAKI, L37

TWAIN, MARK, M269  
WALLACE, DAVID FOSTER, N343  
WENDEROTH, JOE, N467  
WEINBERGER, ELIOT, N123  
WHITE, E. B., M473  
WHITMAN, WALT, M225  
WILLIAMS, WILLIAM CARLOS, M231  
WOLFE, TOM, M597  
WOOLF, VIRGINIA, L445  
WRIGHT, JAMES, N75  
YOURCENAR, MARGUERITE, L487  
ZIUSUDRA OF SUMER, L7

## Acknowledgments

The three volumes in this series were curated and written over a fifteen-year period, and they benefited enormously from many generous people.

My former students Leslie Canton, Elliott Krause, and Dylan Nice gave me invaluable editorial assistance for each respective volume. My friends and colleagues Thalia Field, Phillip Lopate, Ander Monson, Deborah Tall, Caroline Casey, Aaron Kunin, Jorie Graham, Sarah Messer, Chris Fischbach, Peter Gadol, Maggie Nelson, Peg Peoples, Honor Moore, David Weiss, Jim Galvin, Vivian Gornick, Paul Meacham, and David Shields suggested lots of essays for me to consider. Joanna Klink read almost every draft of every introduction in every one of these volumes, and her feedback made each of them better. The University of Wyoming, the California Institute of the Arts, and the University of Iowa provided me with research funding at crucial points during each volume's creation. And the Lannan Foundation somehow always knew when I was working on these volumes, offering me an inspiring place to live and work so that I could complete each volume with focus and intensity and a lot of good v.p.

My first editor at Graywolf, Anne Czarniecki, helped me to figure out the right tone for the introductions in the series' first volume, and since then, for more than a decade, Katie Dublinski has raised the bar for each subsequent volume, helping me to develop that tone and to find a way to let it grow with me as my thinking about the essay expanded, contracted, digressed, and matured. Maintaining not only the look but the feel of multiple volumes of books over a fifteen-year period was a mighty challenge, and if we've succeeded it's because of Katie's ability to keep one eye on the minutia of thousands of pages while never losing sight of the full vision of this project. She is one of the smartest, kindest, and most perceptive editors I have worked with.

Lastly, I want to thank Fiona McCrae, Graywolf's Publisher and Director. In the spring of 1999, I had just completed my first book, *Halls of Fame*, which nobody seemed to want. The resistance that editors expressed was as succinct as it was unanimous: "This is weird." Luckily however, I also

met Fiona that year, and she responded to the book's manuscript with what might be one of the most peculiar sentences ever uttered in contemporary publishing: "You know, Graywolf just happens to be looking for some weird essay collections."

And with that, a few months later, I had signed to publish not only my first book with Graywolf Press but also the first anthology in this series. Graywolf has been game for this project's abnormal approach to non-fiction from the very beginning, never losing faith in it, pushing me when I needed pushing, wrangling me when I needed wrangling, and helping me to fulfill my fantasy of creating a global repository for countless unusual kinds of essays. There is no other press as committed to this stuff as Graywolf. Thank you, wolves.

## A Note about the Title

In 1903, in the February issue of *Library World*, the head of a public library in Hampstead, England, published an article entitled “The Fiction Nuisance and Its Abatement.” William Doubleday was a well-respected librarian at the time. He’d written a couple books on library science, as well as a decent work of criticism on Keats, so his article attracted attention.

“The Public Library is primarily educational in its work,” Doubleday explained, so the “amusements of fiction,” as he perceived them, were not welcome on his shelves. “Education is in the air,” he continued, “and with its efficiency is bound up the welfare of our nation.”

At stake for Doubleday were the delicate and impressionable minds of his public library patrons, those citizens whom Doubleday had begun to notice were inquiring about novels more so than anything else at his library. He argued that as many as 80 percent of British library patrons were now asking for fiction recommendations over any other kind of literature.

“We recognise that whilst some novels have positive value,” he said, “others are at best harmless.”

Hostility toward fiction was nothing new at the time. For hundreds of years throughout the English-speaking world, the growing popularity of fiction had incited debates about the legitimacy of the genre: Would novels corrupt a nation’s youth? Did they deserve a place in libraries? Were they even worthy of the paper they were printed on?

To each of these questions, Doubleday believed the answer was no. Instead, he argued that literature that is truly worth of our attention “is a special form of literature read by young men.” After all, studious and serious young male readers “recognize the sternness of the battle of life,” he argued, and therefore are “resolutely preparing to face it” by applying themselves exclusively to “serious reading.”

To help set the nation straight on a path toward “serious reading,” Doubleday proposed that his fellow librarians start discouraging their patrons from reading works of fiction by simply recommending that they read something else. For example:

Selections of any books but novels may be produced upon request for the reader's choice . . .

Or if that didn't work:

In some libraries, borrowers have been allowed open access to all the bookshelves except those containing novels . . .

Or:

One common plan has been to allow borrowers to use a supplementary ticket, "not available for works of fiction" . . .

And lastly:

Attractive works of non-fiction may be temptingly displayed in convenient showcases

And this is why we ought to take note of Doubleday, because lurking inside the silliness of his scheming anxiety is the origin of America's conflicted relationship with this genre.

If you look up above, in that last suggestion, you'll find a hyphenated word. It appears in his article on page 207, volume V, issue 56, in the February 1903 issue of *Library World*: "Attractive works of non-fiction may be temptingly displayed in convenient showcases."

As dispiritingly unceremonial as this quotation is, some linguists believe that it is the first use of "non-fiction" in the English language.

It's clear of course that Doubleday didn't coin this term in order to help his readers passionately explore the nooks and crannies of a peculiar new kind of literature that he'd recently discovered, but rather because he wanted to steer his readers away from books that he didn't like. What should bother us about the term "non-fiction," therefore, is that it emerged as a tool of provincialism, deployed by a man who was far less interested in celebrating what this genre actually is than in demarcating a border across which nothing else could pass.

And yet somehow, within the span of a single century, "non-fiction" has become the bland de facto banner that flaps above everything from journal-



ism to memoir, imposing the same aesthetic standards and expectations on everything that falls beneath its shadow.

I am writing beneath its shadow now, in fact. As the director of the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa, I grapple with the implications of this term every day. Whether I'm fielding inquiries from motivational speakers who want to come to Iowa to promote their new self-help books, or battling with my school's administrators in order to give students who are studying "non-fiction" the same opportunities as their peers in fiction and poetry, I can't ignore the effects of so inaccurate a term. By embracing a label such as "non-fiction," the creative writing community has signaled to the world that what goes on in this genre is at best utilitarian and at worst an utter mystery. We have segregated the genre from art.

So I use "Essay" because I want you to know these are art.

I use "History" because it's one that we ought to be proud of.

And I use "New" because I hope, deep down, and for real, that the essay and its history will be so well known that readers in the future will consider this title old.



## A Note about the Editor

John D'Agata teaches creative writing at the University of Iowa, where he directs the Nonfiction Writing Program.

## A Note about the Typography

Book design by Wendy Holdman  
Composition by Bookmobile Design & Digital Publisher Services,  
Minneapolis, Minnesota.  
Manufactured by Bookmobile on acid-free paper.