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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK ATTEMPTS to put forward and interpret a tradition: the personal essay. Though long spoken of as a subcategory of the essay, the personal essay has rarely been isolated and studied as such. It should certainly be celebrated, because it is one of the most approachable and diverting types of literature we possess.

The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. Through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints, and whimsies, the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialogue—a friendship, if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship.

At the core of the personal essay is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience. As Michel de Montaigne, the great innovator and patron saint of personal essayists, put it, "Every man has within himself the entire human condition." This meant that when he was telling about himself, he was talking, to some degree, about all of us. The personal essay has an implicitly democratic bent, in the value it places on experience rather than status distinctions. "And on the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own rump," wrote Montaigne.

Let us get certain worrisome distinctions out of the way. The traditional division in the essay has been between formal and informal essays. Not being good at definitions, I will take the easy way out and quote Holman and Harmon's *A Handbook to Literature*. The formal (sometimes called impersonal) essay is characterized by "seriousness of purpose, dignity, logical organization, length. . . . The technique of the formal essay is now practically identical with that of all factual or theoretical prose writing in

which literary effect is secondary to serious purpose." The informal essay, in contrast, is characterized by "the personal element (self-revelation, individual tastes and experiences, confidential manner), humor, graceful style, rambling structure, unconventionality or novelty of theme, freshness of form, freedom from stiffness and affectation, incomplete or tentative treatment of topic."

The personal essay is a subset of the informal essay, or, as *A Handbook of Literature* defines it, "a kind of informal essay, with an intimate style, some autobiographical content or interest, and an urbane conversational manner." To make things more confusing, another subset of the informal essay is the familiar essay, which sounds rather like the personal essay: "The more personal, intimate type of informal essay. It deals lightly, often humorously, with personal experiences, opinions, and prejudices, stressing especially the unusual or novel in attitude and having to do with the varied aspects of everyday life." I have never seen a strong distinction drawn in print between the personal essay and the familiar essay; maybe they are identical twins, maybe close cousins. The difference, if there is any, is one of nuance, I suspect. The familiar essay values lightness of touch above all else; the personal essay, which need not be light, tends to put the writer's "I" or idiosyncratic angle more at center stage.

The personal essay has an open form and a drive toward candor and self-disclosure. Unlike the formal essay, it depends less on airtight reasoning than on style and personality, what Elizabeth Hardwick called "the soloist's personal signature flowing through the text."

1 The Conversational Element

In its preference for a conversational approach, the personal essay shows its relationship to the dialogue, an ancient form going back to Plato. Both forms acknowledge the duality, or rather multiplicity, of selves that human beings harbor. "It is natural to enter into dialogues and disputes with others," writes the critic Stuart Hampshire, "because it is natural to enter into disputes with oneself. The mind works by contradiction." Personal essayists converse with the reader because they are already having dialogues and disputes with themselves.

Montaigne may not have been, as he claimed, the first writer to take himself as his subject, but he was perhaps the first to talk to himself convincingly on the page. Reading him, we seem to be eavesdropping on a mind in solitude. He chatters, pen in hand, and keeps putting questions to himself when the essay threatens to flag.

Still, this talky manner is not entirely original. If we go back to Seneca, as Montaigne did, we see the same tendency to reproduce the give-and-

take of conversation. I'm not speaking of Seneca's formal essays, which employ the full machinery of classical oratory, but his letters, which come much closer to being personal essays in the modern mode. By using the device of a letter to a friend, Seneca was able to incorporate conversational throat-clearings, feints, rhetorical questions, and replies, talking past his alleged correspondent to the general reader. He will pop in a phrase such as "This is all very well, you might say, but isn't it sometimes a lot simpler . . . ?" Seneca examines his own doubts by placing objections in the mouth of the reader. His prose is thorny, abrupt like conversation, and it leaves a sort of dry almond taste from all those chewy aphorisms.

The personal essay has historically sought to puncture the stiffness of formal discourse with language that is casual, everyday, demotic, direct. William Hazlitt, one of the giants of the form, took Dr. Johnson to task for always using big words and Latinate syntax. Hazlitt defined his own ideal, the familiar style, as the following: "To write a genuine familiar or truly English style, is to write as any one would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes." The conversational dynamic—the desire for contact—is ingrained in the form, and serves to establish a quick emotional intimacy with the audience.

2 Honesty, Confession, and Privacy

Let us say that the writer has caught the reader's attention with a frank, conversational manner. In effect, a contract between writer and reader has been drawn up: the essayist must then make good on it by delivering, or discovering, as much honesty as possible.

The struggle for honesty is central to the ethos of the personal essay. "I want to be an honest man and a good writer," James Baldwin put it, in that order. Yet the personal essayist often admits that few of us can remain honest for long, since humans are incorrigibly self-deceiving, rationalizing animals. Ironically, it is this skepticism that uniquely equips the personal essayist for the difficult climb into honesty. So often the "plot" of a personal essay, its drama, its suspense, consists in watching how far the essayist can drop past his or her psychic defenses toward deeper levels of honesty. One may speak of a vertical dimension in the form: if the essayist can delve further underneath, until we feel the topic has been handled as honestly, as *fairly* as possible, then at least one essential condition of a successful personal essay has been met. (The others, such as pleasurable literary style, formal shapeliness, and intellectual sustenance, still await consideration.) If, however, the essayist stays at the same flat level of self-

disclosure and understanding throughout, the piece may be pleasantly smooth, but it will not awaken that shiver of self-recognition—equivalent to the frisson in horror films when the monster looks at himself in the mirror—which all lovers of the personal essay await as a reward.

There is a certain strictness, or even cruelty at times, in the impulse of the personal essayist to scrape away illusions. In "On the Pleasure of Hating," Hazlitt describes friends getting together to analyze their mutual acquaintances: "We regarded them no more in our experiments than 'mice in an air-pump,' or like malefactors, they were regularly cut down and given over to the dissecting-knife. We spared neither friend nor foe. We sacrificed human infirmities at the shrine of truth. The skeletons of character might be seen, after the juice was extracted, dangling in the air like flies in cobwebs."

Often the rough handling begins with oneself. "We must remove the mask," says Montaigne. For Wendell Berry, in "An Entrance to the Woods," the mask is human nature itself, and the wilderness alone can help him shed its false lendings: "And so, coming here, what I have done is strip away the human facade that usually stands between me and the universe."

The spectacle of baring the naked soul is meant to awaken the sympathy of the reader, who is apt to forgive the essayist's self-absorption in return for the warmth of his or her candor. Some vulnerability is essential to the personal essay. Unproblematically self-assured, self-contained, self-satisfied types will not make good essayists. There is, of course, such a thing as a rhetoric of sincerity, and the skilled essayist can fake a vulnerable tone. But if this is done too often, the skilled reader will turn away in disgust. "There is one thing the essayist cannot do—he cannot indulge himself in deceit or in concealment, for he will be found out in no time," wrote E. B. White.

The personal essayist must above all be a reliable narrator; we must trust his or her core of sincerity. We must also feel secure that the essayist has done a fair amount of introspective homework already, is grounded in reality, and is trying to give us the maximum understanding and intelligence of which he or she is capable. A dunderhead and a psychotic killer may be sincere, but that would not sufficiently recommend them for the genre.

Part of our trust in good personal essayists issues, paradoxically, from their exposure of their own betrayals, uncertainties, and self-mistrust. Their sincerity issues from an awareness of their potential for insincerity—see Max Beerbohm's telling aside, "But (it seems that I must begin every paragraph by questioning the sincerity of what I have just said)"—and it gives them a doubled authority.

In focusing on the honesty of personal essayists, I do not mean to imply

that they are relentlessly exposing dark secrets about themselves. We learn more about their habits of thought than about the sorts of abuses and crimes that spice our afternoon TV talk shows: incest, date-rape, additions. The sins that make these essayists cringe in retrospect usually turn out to be an insensitivity that wounded another, a lack of empathy, or the callowness of youth.

Is it a paradox that personal essayists are often excruciatingly frank, yet protective of their privacy? Richard Rodriguez, for instance, is a master of the confessional tone, yet he tells us that his family calls him "Mr. Secrets," and he plays a hide-and-seek game of revealing himself. We learn very little about the actual circumstances of Max Beerbohm's life from his writings. How he managed to make ends meet, with whom he had affairs, whether his was a difficult or an easy marriage—these celebrity tidbits are never volunteered by the gentlemanly Max. Yet few writers have limned so quirky and recognizable a self-portrait. Chronic Beerbohm readers come to feel as close to him as if they were behind the wheel of a video arcade game, seeing how the world comes at him and recognizing the exact moment at which his tenderness is likely to swerve into mischief.

How the world comes at another person, the irritations, jubulations, aches and pains, humorous flashes—these are the classic building materials of the personal essay. We learn the rhythm by which the essayist receives, digests, and spits out the world, and we learn the shape of his or her privacy. "If you wish to preserve your secret," wrote Alexander Smith of Montaigne, "wrap it up in frankness."

3 The Contractions and Expansions of the Self

Personal essayists are adept at interrogating their ignorance. Just as often as they tell us what they know, they ask at the beginning of an exploration of a problem what it is they don't know—and why. They follow the clue of their ignorance through the maze. Intrigued with their limitations, both physical and mental, they are attracted to cul-de-sac: what one doesn't understand, or can't do, is as good a place as any to start investigating the borders of the self. So Natalia Ginzburg tells us that she can never remember the names of even the most famous actors; Charles Lamb confides that he has no musical ear; Max Beerbohm analyzes his failure to grasp philosophy.

Also common to the genre is a taste for littleness. This includes self-belittlement. In "Of Greatness," Abraham Cowley, after quoting Horace's "The gods have done well in making me a humble and small-spirited fellow," goes on to say slyly, "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 great passion, and therefore, I hope, I have done with it), it would be, I think, with prettiness, rather than with majestic beauty."

Natalia Ginzburg's collection of essays is entitled *The Little Virtues*. We see operating here a form of inverse boasting: in exchange for lack of stature or power in the world, the personal essayist claims unique access to the small, humble things in life. And this taste for the miniature becomes a strong suit of the form: the ability to turn anything close at hand (Charles Lamb's ears, Virginia Woolf's moth, Samuel Johnson's boarding house) into a grand meditational adventure.

Just as the personal essayist is able to make the small loom large, so he or she simultaneously contracts and expands the self. This is done first by finding the borders, limits, defects, and disabilities of the particular human package one owns, then by pointing them out, which implies at least a partial surmounting through detachment. The personal essay is the reverse of that set of Chinese boxes that you keep opening, only to find a smaller one within. Here you start with the small—the package of flaws and limits—and suddenly find a slightly larger container, insinuated by the essay's successful articulation and the writer's self-knowledge. The personal essayist is a Houdini who, having confessed his sins and peccadilloes and submitted voluntarily to the reader's censoring handcuffs, suddenly slips them off with malicious ease by claiming, *I am more than the perpetrator of that shameful act; I am the knower and commentator as well.*

If tragedy is said to ennoble people and comedy to cut people down to size, then the personal essay, with its ironic deflations, its insistence on human frailty, tilts toward the comic. Montaigne (like his predecessor and fellow humanist Erasmus) was at pains to show *Homo sapiens* as a fickle, conceited fool whose vanity needed pulling down. However, by drawing attention to so many strands of inconsistency in human behavior, he could not help but create the opposite impression: a humanity enlarged by complexity. The fulsome confession of limit carries the secret promise of an almost infinite opening-out.

Personal essayists from Montaigne on have been fascinated with the changeableness and plasticity of the materials of human personality. Starting with self-description, they have realized they can never render all at once the entire complexity of a personality. So they have elected to follow an additive strategy, offering incomplete shards, one mask or persona after another: the eager, skeptical, amiable, tender, curmudgeonly, antic, somber. If "we must remove the mask," it is only to substitute another mask. The hope is that in the end, when an essayist's lifework has been accumulated, all these personae will add up to a genuine unmasking.

In the meantime, the personal essayist tries to make his many partial

self dance to the same beat—to unite, through force of voice and style, these discordant, fragmentary personae so that the reader can accept them as issuing from one coherent self. Sometimes a persona is literally artificial, as in Charles Lamb's "Elia," a lightly fictionalized stand-in for himself. Lamb comically exploits the supposed differences between his narrator and himself while getting away with a fair amount of autobiography. Unless the essayist forces the issue, the reader is often not aware of the discontinuities among his personae, so strong is the illusion of cohesive selfhood in the voice of a writer we admire.

The harvesting of self-contradiction is an intrinsic part of the personal essay form. Often, seeing two samples of an essayist's work allows us to grasp this principle of multiple personae in action. The Edward Hoagland we meet in "The Courage of Turtles," a gentle naturalist stroking a turtle's belly, is both contradicted and extended by Hoagland's confession of spanking women in "The Threshold and the Jolt of Pain." If some readers are repelled by a writer's behavioral contradictions, this is quite all right, because the personal essayist is not necessarily out to win the audience's unqualified love but to present the complex portrait of a human being.

This spectacle is offered up in sections, which makes autobiographies and personal essays, for all their overlapping aspects, fundamentally different. A memoirist is entitled to move in a linear direction, accruing extra points of psychological or social shading from initial set-ups, like a novelist, the deeper he or she moves in the narrative. There is no need to keep explaining who the narrator or the narrator's father or mother are at the beginning of each chapter. The personal essayist, though, cannot assume that the reader will ever have read anything by him or her before, and so must reestablish a persona each time and embed it in a context by providing sufficient autobiographical background. This usually means having to repeat basic circumstances of his life materials over and over—a wildly wasteful procedure, from the standpoint of narrative economy. Far better, you would think, for the essayist to get it over with once and for all and simply write his life story in a linear fashion. But for one thing, he may, in a fit of modesty, feel that his life story is not worth telling in toto, even if a portion of it seems to be. And for another, the essay form allows the writer to circle around one particular autobiographical piece, squeezing all possible meaning out of it, while leaving the greater part of his life story available for later milking. It may even be that the personal essayist is more temperamentally suited to this circling procedure, diving into the volcano of self and extracting a single hot coal to consider and shape, either because of laziness or because of an aesthetic impulse to control a smaller frame.

4 The Role of Contrariety

It is often the case that personal essayists intentionally go against the grain of popular opinion. They raise the ante, as it were, making it more difficult for the reader to identify frictionlessly with the writer. The need to assert a quite specific temperament frequently leads the essayist into playing the curmudgeon, for there is no quicker way to demonstrate idiosyncrasy and independence than to stand a platitude on its head (see Dr. Johnson on solitude in the country), to show a prickly opposition to what the rest of humanity views as patently wholesome (Beerbohm on "Going Out for a Walk"), or to find merits in what the community regards as loathsome (Hazlitt's "On the Pleasure of Hating"). The touchy sensibility of a Hazlitt, Beerbohm, or Cioran, ever on the alert for an opportunity to bristle, makes us follow them with amused suspense: what will they think to object to next?

Behind these contrarieties is a fear of staleness and cliché, or, to put the matter more positively, a compulsion toward fresh expression. To assert that all men are brothers, that prejudice and racism are bad, and that nature should not be despoiled may win a writer points in heaven, but it is doubtful that these pronouncements will quicken the reader's pulse. The novice essayist often errs by taking a strong moralistic stand and running it into the ground, with nowhere to go after two paragraphs. Here the personal essayist will open up a new flank, locating a tension between two valid, opposing goals, or a partial virtue in some apparent ill, or an ambivalence in his own belief-system. I am not saying that an essayist should become an immoralist just for the sake of originality, but that he should be alert for contradictions that open up new ways of looking at old subjects.

The enemy of the personal essay is self-righteousness, not just because it is tiresome and ugly in itself, but because it slows down the dialectic of self-questioning, what Cioran calls "thinking against oneself." Of course, personal essayists may write from powerful moral or political conviction, so long as they are also willing to render a frank, shaded account of their own feelings. Mary McCarthy, describing in "My Confession" how she became a staunch anti-Stalinist, is unafraid to tell the less than noble part that vanity, laziness, and stubbornness played in this conversion. George Orwell uncovers the proper little fascist in himself as a schoolboy in "Such, Such Were the Joys . . ." and elsewhere (*The Road to Wigan Pier*) is honest enough to admit that he sometimes found himself recoiling at the smell of the workers he was otherwise so keen to defend. James Baldwin's moral passion is all the more credible once we know about his struggles with his father and his admissions of irrational rage and opportunism.

The conscience of the personal essay arises from the author's examination of his or her prejudices. Essayists must be able to pass judgment, or else their work will be toothless; but this right should extend from an awareness of their own potential culpability, if only through mental temptation. The idea is to implicate first oneself and then the reader in a fault that seems initially to belong safely elsewhere. The essayist is someone who lives with the guilty knowledge that he is "prejudiced" (Mencken called his essay collections *Prejudices*) and has a strong predisposition for or against certain everyday phenomena. It then becomes his business to attend to these inner signals, these stomach growls, these seemingly indefensible intuitions, and try to analyze what lies underneath them, the better to judge them. As Georg Lukacs wrote, "The essay is a judgment, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the system) but the process of judging."

S The Problem of Egotism

Thoreau justifies his use of "I" on the opening page of *Walden*: "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 that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking." Still, it takes a fair amount of ego to discourse on one's private affairs and offer judgments about life. This can make the writer, let alone the reader, uneasy. Most people are brought up to think it is impolite to talk much about themselves; in academic papers, scholars are discouraged from using the first person singular. Surely one of the reasons for the self-deprecating air that many personal essayists adopt is to ward off potential charges of vanity or self-absorption.

E. B. White confronted this problem head-on when he wrote:

I think some people find the essay the last resort of the egoist, a much too self-conscious and self-serving form for their taste; they feel that it is presumptuous of a writer to assume that his little excursions or his small observations will interest the reader. There is some justice in their complaint. I have always been aware that I am by nature self-absorbed and egoistical; to write of myself to the extent I have done indicates a too great attention to my own life, not enough to the lives of others. I have worn many shirts, and not all of them have been a good fit. But when I am discouraged or downcast I need only fling open the door of my closet, and there, hidden behind everything else, hangs the mantle of Michel de Montaigne, smelling slightly of cam-phot.

Since White was one of the most self-effacing personal essayists, it is interesting that even he was stung with guilt about egotism. His temporary solution—wrapping himself in the mantle of Montaigne—is also interesting, as though only the personal essay tradition could validate his self-involvement.

The nineteenth-century English writer Alexander Smith drew some helpful distinctions between pleasurable and irritating egotism in essayists: "The speaking about oneself is not necessarily offensive. A modest, truthful man speaks better about himself than about anything else, and on that subject his speech is likely to be most profitable to his hearers. . . . If he be without taint of boastfulness, of self-sufficiency, of hungry vanity, the world will not press the charge home. If a man discourses continually of his wines, his plate, his titled acquaintances, the number and quality of his horses, his men-servants and maid-servants, he must discourse very skillfully indeed if he escapes being called a coxcomb."

Smith reassures us that "it is this egotism, this perpetual reference to self, in which the charm of the essayist resides. If a man is worth knowing at all, he is worth knowing well." In a similar vein, Logan Pearsall Smith wrote that "the amused observation of one's own self is a veritable gold mine whose surface has hardly yet been scratched." While personal essayists as a rule share that conviction, all have occasionally had to wrestle with what might be called the stench of ego. A person can write about himself from angles that are charmed, fond, delightfully nerdy; alter the lens just a little and he crosses over into gloating, pettiness, defensiveness, score settling (which includes self-hate), or whining about his victimization. The trick is to realize that one is not important, except insofar as one's example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish.

Cheek and Irony

Closely allied to these seesaws of modesty and egotism, universality and touchy eccentricity, is the penchant of the personal essayist for outbreaks of mischievous impudence. The conversational address to the reader is frequently the signal for such cheeky liberties, as though the rebellious, clever servant-author were tweaking the nose of the dull-witted master-reader. Cheekiness is a way of keeping readers alert. It cuts through the pious and commonplace.

Such cool impertinence often takes the form of a self-reflexive moment, which punctures the argument by drawing attention to the stage machinery of essayistic discourse. Montaigne launched this habit by impishly and preemptively criticizing his essays ("some excrements of an aged mind").

Beeber's "Laughter" begins, "M. Bergson, in his well-known essay on the theme, says . . . well, he says many things; but none of these, though I have just read them, do I clearly remember, nor am I sure that in the act of reading I understand any of them." This is an example of how the facetiously self-reflective confession of an inadequacy can have the perverse effect of cheek. When Walter Benjamin ends "Unpacking My Library" by saying about the true collector, "So I have erected one of his dwellings, with books as the building stones, before you, and now he is going to disappear inside, as is only fitting," he is both parodying the solemnity of the learned essay and treating the reading audience like children at a puppet show.

Part of what gives personal essayists the license to be so cheeky is their suspicion that they are not performing in the central ring of the literary circus. "The essayist, unlike the novelist, the poet, and the playwright, must be content in his self-imposed role of second-class citizen," wrote E. B. White. "A writer who has his sights trained on the Nobel Prize or other earthly triumphs had best write a novel, a poem, or a play, and leave the essayist to ramble about, content with living a free life and enjoying the satisfactions of a somewhat undisciplined existence."

Georg Lukacs, in "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," specifically linked the essayist's cheeky humor and the status of the genre. Referring to "that humor and that irony which we find in the writings of every truly great essayist," he observed that the "essayist dismisses his own proud hopes which sometimes lead him to believe that he has come close to the ultimate: he has, after all, no more to offer than explanations of the poems of others, or at best his own ideas. But he ironically adapts himself to this smallness—the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in the face of life—and even emphasizes it with ironic modesty."

The Idler Figure

As part of their ironic modesty, personal essayists frequently represent themselves as loafers or retirees, inactive and tangential to the marketplace. The shiftless marginality of the essayist's persona is underscored by the titles of some of the most famous essay series: *The Idler*, *The Rambler* (Samuel Johnson), *The Spectator*, *The Tatler* (Addison and Steele). Perhaps by affecting the role of lazy scribblers, essayists make themselves out to be harmless, thereby able to poke fun at will.

Asian literature has a long tradition of the retired scholar—sometimes forced into premature exile by falling into political disfavor, like the Chinese essayist Ou-yang Hsiu—who uses his leisure to contemplate the beauties of nature and the poetic transience of life. The Japanese monk

Kenko, having withdrawn from the world for spiritual purposes, wrote a book of stream-of-consciousness mini-essays called *Essays in Idleness*. Seneca penned his letters during enforced idleness and exile. Montaigne also portrayed himself as a retired country gentleman, given over to his library and idle thoughts, when in fact he still carried on important diplomatic missions during the religious wars.

Joseph Addison wrote in his *Spectator*, "I live in the World rather as a Spectator of Mankind, than as one of the species. . . . I have acted in all the Parts of my Life as a looker-on, which is the Character I intend to preserve in this Paper." The use of the term "Character," a popular eighteenth-century literary form which broke mankind down into types, alerts us that we are getting from Addison a stylized essayistic persona rather than realistic autobiography. Addison's partner, Sir Richard Steele, similarly offers us a detached narrator, cheerfully outside the net of economic productivity. In "Twenty-four Hours in London," he follows the crowd around for a day: "It is an inexpressible Pleasure to know a little of the World, and be of no Character or Significance in it. To be ever unconcerned, and ever looking on new Objects with an endless Curiosity, is a Delight known only to those who are turned for Speculation: Nay, they who enjoy it, must value things only as they are the Objects of Speculation, without drawing any worldly Advantage to themselves from them, but just as they are what they contribute to their Amusement, or the Improvement of the Mind."

Here the idler begins to defend himself, even to adapt a tone of superiority toward the breadwinner. Robert Louis Stevenson, in his essay "An Apology for Idlers," advances this line of argument.

Extreme *busyness* . . . is a symptom of deficient vitality; and a faculty for idleness implies a catholic appetite and a strong sense of personal identity. There is a sort of dead-alive, hackneyed people about, who are scarcely conscious of living except in the exercise of some conventional occupation. Bring these fellows into the country, or set them aboard ship, and you will see how they pine for their desk or their study. They have no curiosity; they cannot give themselves to random provocations; they do not take pleasure in the exercise of their faculties for its own sake . . . they *cannot* be idle, their nature is not generous enough; and they pass those hours in a sort of coma, which are not dedicated to furious mulling in the gold-mill.

Substitute "essayist" for "idler" in Stevenson's passage, and you have a catalogue of the genre's virtues: curiosity; openness; appetite for pleasure; willingness to reflect, to give oneself to "random provocations," nature, beauty. All this adds up to the capacity for perception. The essayist is

fascinated with perception, which provides a never-ending source of speculative material. The art of vision can take place under normal circumstances (as in Woolf's "Street Haunting") or be heightened by drugs (Benjamin's "Hashish in Marseilles"), hunger (Soyinka's "Why Do I Fast?"), ecstatic nature mysticism (Dillard's "Seeing"), or illness (Lu Hsun's "Death").

By Stevenson's logic, only the idle person is able to practice *seeing*—to perceive the little, uncommercial miracles in life. The essayist here aligns himself with what is traditionally considered a female perspective, in its appreciation of sentiment, dailiness, and the domestic. Indeed, the male personal essayist, quick to label himself an idler, also volunteers that he is something less than a virile patriarch. A somewhat celibate bachelorhood seems to hover around the Spectator, Idler, Rambler, and other stylized essayistic personae. Lamb describes his first-person surrogate, Elia, with a shrewd bit of self-analysis: "He was too much of the boy-man. The *toga virilis* never sate gracefully on his shoulders. The impressions of infancy had burnt into him, and he resented the impertinence of manhood." Stevenson, who did marry, was still chiefly known for his boys' stories and essays like "The Lantern-Bearers," which dwell lovingly on this preadult stage of life. Walter Benjamin portrayed himself as a bookworm, a nerd, a schlemiel who could never quite grow up and enter the adult world of making a living.

I must reiterate, of course, that some of this self-portraiture has a fictional slant. Many personal essayists have enjoyed alternately stripping themselves bare and creating a slightly distorted, even shabbier version of themselves, the way the comedian Jack Benny made himself out to be much stingier than he was, just for the joke of it. While the personal essayist is such a trustworthy witness, at times no one works closer to "unreliable narrator" territory. Certain high-pitched tones of Lamb, Hazlitt, Beerbohm, and others stir up unmistakable echoes of Dostoevsky's Underground Man, Ford Madox Ford's Good Soldier, and other unreliable narrators. How to account for this paradox? We should recall that the novel and the essay rose together and fed off each other as literary forms; fiction's "unreliable narrator" may have even derived initially, in part, from the mischievous candor and first-person expressiveness unleashed in personal essays.

The Past, the Local, and the Melancholy

The past is frequently and often lyrically visited by personal essayists. The retrospective glance comes naturally to the essayist: the past is an Aladdin's lamp which he or she never tires of rubbing. As Hazlitt said about

his friend Lamb, "Mr. Lamb has a distaste to new faces, to new books, to new buildings, to new customs. . . . He evades the present, he mocks the future. His affections revert to, and settle on, the past, but then, even this must have something personal and local in it to interest him deeply and thoroughly."

Beerbohm, who took up Lamb's mantle a century later, also showed a fastidious, unjournalistic distaste for the topical. "Sir Max Beerbohm seems to bring with him the aroma of an age that is just past: his writings always were like that and they always will be; just not quite up to date," wrote Bonamy Dobrée, "and so, one guesses, enduring."

Another fine sifter of the past, the contemporary Irish essayist Hubert Butler, now in his nineties, remarked in "Beside the Nore," "I have always believed that local history is more important than national history." In Butler, the personal essayist's loyalty to the local and near-at-hand are intermixed with an amateur archeologist's search for traces of history. "The past comes close in disconnected fragments and I was thinking of the days when we were children and had dancing classes with the young Tighes at the Noreview Hotel in Thomastown; their mother, with my Aunt Harriet, used to run a Christian Science Reading Room opposite the Castle in Kilkenny, two spiders into whose web no fly ever came." Though Butler traveled widely, in Russia, Egypt, China, and the United States, and got swept up in the political events of his time, he wrote, "I am more inclined to apologize for writing about great events, which touched me not at all, than for tracing again the tiny snail track which I made myself." This "snail track" might be the insignia of the personal essay genre.

There is a melancholy tone in much of Butler's work, which also crops up in Montaigne, Lamb, Hazlitt, Lu Hsun, Gore Vidal, and so on. It might be called "the voice of middle age." If the personal essay frequently presents a middle-aged point of view, it may be because it is the fruit of ripened experience, which naturally brings with it some worldly disenchantment, or at least realism. With middle age also comes a taste for equilibrium; hence, that stubborn, almost unnerving calm that so often pervades the personal essay. Montaigne exemplified the melancholy, stoical balance of middle age ("I have seen the grass, the flower, and the fruit; now I see the dryness—happily since it is naturally"), which is, for better or worse, the by-product of a developed sense of selfhood.

F. Scott Fitzgerald starts "The Crack-Up" by sounding the quintessential note of middle-aged experience: "Of course all life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work—the ones big sudden blows that come, or seem to come, from outside—the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about, don't show their effect all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within—that you don't feel until it's too late

to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again."

While young people excel at lyrical poetry and mathematics, it is hard to think of anyone who made a mark on the personal essay form in his or her youth. The closest candidates might be James Baldwin and Joan Didion, and both adopted precociously world-weary personae while still in their twenties. Baldwin had no sooner left his brutal Harlem adolescence than he began describing it, with rueful ache and Jamesian distance, like a lost kingdom. Didion's elegiac "Goodbye to All That," written at thirty-four, is already saturated with her trademark disenchantment.

It is difficult to write analytically from the middle of confusion, and youth is a confusion in which the self and its desires have not yet sorted themselves out. A young person still thinks it is possible—there is time enough—to become all things: athlete and aesthete, soldier and pacifist, anchoirite and debauchee. Later, knowing one's fate and accepting the responsibility of that uninnocent knowledge define the perspective of the form. The personal essayist looks back at the choices that were made, the roads not taken, the limiting familial and historic circumstances, and what might be called the catastrophe of personality. In literature, noted Gore Vidal, "the true confessors have been aware that not only is life mostly failure, but that in one's failure or pettiness or wrongness exists the living drama of the self." The wonder is that the personal essay can make this bitter awareness appetizing and even amusing to the reader.

Questions of Form and Style

The essay is a notoriously flexible and adaptable form. It possesses the freedom to move anywhere, in all directions. It acts as if all objects were equally near the center and as if "all subjects are linked to each other" (Montaigne) by free association. This freedom can be daunting, not only for the novice essayist confronting such latitude but for the critic attempting to pin down its formal properties.

The essay challenges formal analysis by what Walter Pater called its "unmethodical method," open to digression and promiscuous meanderings. Dr. Johnson described the essay as "a loose sally of the mind" and "an irregular, undigested piece"—which did not prevent him from undertaking a substantial involvement in the form, suggesting at least a hope that it would bring him aesthetic dividends. I take with a grain of salt those claims, by slumming lovers of the essay, that it is not really an art form, and somehow better off for being what the Spanish philosopher Eduardo Nicol called "*almost* literature and *almost* philosophy." From my perspective, there is no *almost* about it: good essays are works of literary

art. Their supposed formlessness is more a strategy to disarm the reader with the appearance of unstudied spontaneity than a reality of composition.

Formally personal essays have, in one sense, a head start over other essay types, being already unified by a strong "I" perspective (either an actual first-person narrator or an implied one). Still, there is no guarantee that the personal essay will attain a shapeliness or a sense of aesthetic inevitability. The well-made short story has a recognizable arc that seems built into the genre, whereas even an essay that is "well made" seems to follow a more intuitive, groping path. The writer of the poorest sonnet is assured that in the end there will be a fourteen-line poem, whereas the essayist may be left with nothing more than a set of fragmentary notes.

The essayist attempts to surround a something—a subject, a mood, a problematic irritation—by coming at it from all angles, wheeling and diving like a hawk, each seemingly digressive spiral actually taking us closer to the heart of the matter. In a well-wrought essay, while the search appears to be widening, even losing its way, it is actually eliminating false hypotheses, narrowing its emotional target and zeroing in on it.

The essayist must be a good storyteller. This is a point rarely made, perhaps because of the classifying urge to keep the two genres neatly fenced off. True, the essayist happily violates the number-one rule of short story workshops, "Show, don't tell"; the glory of the essayist is to tell, once and for all, everything that he or she thinks, knows, and understands. Yet often it happens that a personal essay starts out in a seemingly directionless or at least open manner, with all the time in the world, only to hop onto a narrative possibility and let the storytelling momentum take it home. Addison and Steele often walk a thin line between the reflective essay and the anecdotal vignette, crossing over when it suits them; Hazlitt's "The Fight" and Lamb's "Dream Children: A Reverie" are both hybrids of essay and fictional technique; Virginia Woolf's "Street Haunting" follows a single character, the narrator, around for an evening; Turgenev organizes "The Execution of Tropmann" around his reactions to a single dramatic event; Orwell's "Such, Such Were the Joys . . ." performs in many ways like an autobiographical novella; Baldwin's personal essays push at the frontier between fiction and reportage. All good essayists make use at times of storytelling devices: descriptions of character and place, incident, dialogue, conflict. They needn't narrate some actual event to produce a narrative. Even a "pure" meditation, the track of one's thoughts, has to be shaped, given a kind of plot or urgency, if it is to communicate.

About Hazlitt's style, Ronald Blythe wrote, "Each essay shows the build-up of numerous small climaxes, such as are sometimes employed in the novel. Excitement and expectation mount." Hazlitt, trained in philos-

ophy, tended to stay closer to a line of argument than other personal essayists do. But even when writers have deliberately shied away from developing a single thesis or line of attack, usually we can locate in their essays a buried argument. The stated subject or title of a piece may be only its pretext. Montaigne's "Of Coaches" works its way round from modes of conveyance to a ringing denunciation of European settlers' treatment of Indians in the New World. E. B. White's "The Ring of Time" begins as a description of a small circus and veers off into a commentary on racial integration. White would probably have been embarrassed to preach integration head-on, but he was less hesitant to back into it casually.

Many times the personal essayist will start to explore a subject, then set up a countertheme, and eventually braid the two. Sara Sulzer's "Meatless Days," for instance, begins as an almost facetious treatment of certain organ meats, but along the way this theme is thickened with family history, cultural conflicts, gender, and grief. The personal essayist is like a cook who learns through trial and error just when to add another spice or countertaste to the stew.

Here the art of elaboration enters in. Much of what characterizes true essayists is the ability to draw out a point through example, list, simile, small variation, hyperbolic exaggeration, whatever. The great essayists have all had this gusto in fleshing out an idea, which becomes not a chore but an opportunity. An example is the opening of Charles Lamb's essay "A Chapter on Ears."

I have no ear.—

Mistake me not, reader—nor imagine that I am by nature destitute of those exterior twin appendages, hanging ornaments, and (architecturally speaking) handsome volutes to the human capital. Better my mother had never borne me.—I am, I think, rather delicately than copiously provided with those conduits; and I feel no disposition to envy the mule for his plenty, or the mole for her exactness, in those ingenious labyrinthine inlets—those indispensable side-intelligencers.

Neither have I incurred, or done anything to incur, with Defoe, that hideous disfigurement, which constrained him to draw upon assurance—to feel "quite unabashed," and at ease upon that article. I was never, I thank my stars, in the pillory; nor, if I read them aright, is it within the compass of my destiny, that I ever should be.

When therefore I say that I have no ear, you will understand me to mean—for *music*.

By this time, the reader will want either to strangle the author or, if he has a taste for Lamb, to laugh. The mock-solemnity with which this slender idea is elaborated, the piling-up of mules and architecture, inlets and

punitive instruments and "side-intelligencers," always makes me smile. Part of the humor rests in the peculiar dictional spin Lamb puts on words. Today's readers may miss this joke, but his contemporaries knew how absurdly dusty his vocabulary was, even for the early nineteenth century. A runaway antiquarianism is one of Lamb's standard comic techniques. Another is the pretend fussy sense of dignity ("rather delicately than copiously provided"). The elegant care with which Lamb's sentences are written, the humor in his wry linguistic touches, make him a writer to savor.

Another technique of the personal essay that serves both structural and comic functions is the digression. The chief role of the digression is to amass all the dimensions of understanding that the essayist can accumulate by bringing in as many contexts as a problem or insight can sustain without overburdening it. The digression must wander off the point only to fulfill it. A kind of elaboration, it scoops up subordinate themes in passing. Some of the essayist's comic irony derives from a self-consciousness about digression, the joke being, as in *Tristram Shandy*, that the writer cannot stay on the point but must garrulously blab about everything.

Another formal technique employed by the personal essayist is the movement from individual to universal. The concrete details of personal experience earn the generalization (often an aphorism), and the generalization sends the author back for more particulars. Sometimes this spiral is aided by a modulation in pronouns: "I," "one," "we," and "you." The jump from "I" to "we" or "you" can seem presumptuous if taken too quickly (as the joke goes, "What do you mean 'we,' masked man?"). It requires preparation and timing; personal essayists must always watch their pronouns carefully.

William Hazlitt, for all his brusque lack of diplomacy, was a master of this pronominal tact. At the beginning of "On Going a Journey," he establishes a highly individuated first-person voice, proudly refusing to sue for reader empathy: "One of the pleasantest things in the world is going a journey; but I like to go by myself. I can enjoy society in a room; but out of doors, nature is company enough for me." In each of these sentences, Hazlitt's jaunty rhythms suggest a hiker swinging his arms, entirely self-sufficient: the first clause invites us in, the semicolon stops us, the second clause pushes us away. The author is celebrating his solitude: the rest of us, stay out. Yet midway down the first page, he is already declaring, "The soul of a journey is liberty, perfect liberty, to think, feel, do, just as one pleases. We go a journey chiefly to be free of all impediments and of all inconveniences; to leave ourselves behind, much more to get rid of others. It is because I want a little breathing-space . . ." and so on. In four sentences he has moved from the eccentric "I" to the mildly generalizing "one," which forms a tactical bridge to the "we" of aphorism and sweeping pronouncement; then back to "I" for more evidence-gathering based

on personal experience. "You" comes in a few sentences later, at first as the actual reader who is being addressed ("if I were to explain to you"), then as a substitute for "I," which furthers the symbiosis between author and audience.

Quotation and the Uses of Learning

In the midst of Hazlitt's rhetorical amble (an essay is a kind of walkabout, which may explain why so many are written about walking), the author throws in a few scraps of poetry, unattributed. Why these quotations? Possibly to elevate the tone a few notches; possibly to poke fun at his own earnestness. But it raises the larger question, what is the stylistic function of quotation in the personal essay?

One obvious answer would seem to be to lend authority to the author's argument. Montaigne was a compulsive sprinkler of citations, and he cheerfully claimed he was doing it to get a free ride on other men's brains. In "Of Books," he talked about this quoting habit: "For I make others say what I cannot say so well, now through the weakness of my language, now through the weakness of my understanding. . . . I have sometimes deliberately not indicated the author, in order to hold in check the temerity of those hasty condemnations that are tossed at all sorts of writings. . . . I want them to give Plutarch a flip on my nose and get burned insulting Seneca in me. I have to hide my weakness under these great authorities."

Montaigne made such a mosaic of his and others' words that quotations became a kind of baroque tilework overlaying his *Essais*, without compromising his originality. If anything, modern readers may feel that he is cutting his forebears down to size, since his own voice is so much more robust than these peeps from the ancients, which we tend to skip. Montaigne, being a Renaissance humanist, reverential toward the classical authors (who themselves used frequent quotation), would not have seen it this way. We must remember that the Renaissance essay partly grew out of the custom of keeping "commonplace books," which were filled with favorite quotations. In England, Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, a learned catch-all encrusted with citations and meditations, became a kind of mother-text inspiring the essay form.

The pleasure of knowing that we are in cultivated hands, attending to a well-stocked, liberally educated mind, is a central attraction of the personal essay. Such learning was easier to demonstrate when there was a commonly recognized body of quotable culture among the educated class. In the Renaissance, this common culture consisted largely of the ancients and the Bible; in nineteenth-century England, of the Elizabethan dramatists and great British poets.

Today, a writer's cultivation might be signaled less by quotation (what is

a modern essayist to quote, without sounding pompous?) than by syntax. A complex, pretzel-shaped sentence by M. F. K. Fisher, Gore Vidal, or Mary McCarthy shows that the writer is still hearing whispers of Latin and has had an old-fashioned "good education." Indeed, now that the dic- tional distinction between the formal and the informal essay has been somewhat eroded, we are as likely to encounter a slightly mannered, ba- roque, "dressed-up" language in contemporary personal essayists (see Baldwin, Vidal, McCarthy) as in their formal counterparts.

Nevertheless, the personal essay has always striven for the ideal of "light learning," which graciously informs without humiliating or playing the pedantic schoolmaster. It has always distanced itself from the scholarly treatise. "The essay," wrote Bonamy Dobrée, ". . . claimed to put aside all pedantry, all learning crammed out of books, and merely gave you the reasonable decent man talking to you or me or anyone else of what he thought about life: or rather, the man was talking to himself and allowing anyone who cared to do so to overhear him." All personal essays are addressed to what Virginia Woolf called "the common reader," that happy, somewhat fuzzy figure who may or may not exist but who has been solicited and invited to partake.

9 The Personal Essay as Mode of Thinking and Being

The essay form as a whole has long been associated with an experimental method. This idea goes back to Montaigne and his endlessly suggestive use of the term *essai* for his writings. To essay is to attempt, to test, to make a run at something without knowing whether you are going to suc- ceed. The experimental association also derives from the other fountain- head of the essay, Francis Bacon, and his stress on the empirical inductive method, so useful to the development of the physical sciences.

There is something heroic in the essayist's gesture of striking out toward the unknown, not only without a map but without certainty that there is anything worthy to be found. One would like to think that the personal essay represents a kind of basic research on the self, in ways that are allied with science and philosophy. Montaigne called himself a new type, an "accidental philosopher," expressing the mocking hope that his im- promptu approach—seemingly the opposite to that of traditional philoso- phers, with their patient construction of logical systems—might almost by chance add up to a philosophy. In the end he got his wish; it would not be inappropriate to teach Montaigne in a moral philosophy course. But what of other personal essayists, and the essay form in general?

The modern German philosopher Theodor Adorno saw rich, subversive

possibilities in precisely the "anti-systematic" properties of the essay. In our century, when the grand philosophical systems seem to have collapsed under their own weight and authoritarian taint, the light-footed, free- wheeling essay suddenly steps forward as an attractive way to open up philosophical discourse. As Adorno put it, "Luck and play are what are essential to the essay. It does not begin with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to discuss; it says what is at issue and stops where it feels itself complete—not where nothing is left to say. . . . The essay does not strive for closed, deductive or inductive construction. It revolts above all against the doctrine—deeply rooted since Plato—that the changing and ephem- eral is unworthy of philosophy, against the ancient injustice toward the transitory."

Adorno's approving statement that "the essay shies away from the vio- lence of dogma" echoes Robert Louis Stevenson's about the idler (read: essayist): "He will not be heard among the dogmatists. He will have a great and cool allowance for all sorts of people and opinions. If he finds no out-of-the-way truths, he will identify himself with no very burning falsehood." When Beerbohm apologizes in "Laughter" for never being able to retain abstract philosophy, he is also inversely speaking out for another way of thinking, taking sides in what R. Lane Kauffmann calls "the historical conflict between fragmentary and totalizing modes of thought—between essay and system."

Recent essayists, such as Roland Barthes, Joan Didion, and Richard Rodriguez, have made a virtue of fragmentation, offering it as a mirror to the unconnectable, archipelago-like nature of modern life. "The usual re- proach against the essay," wrote Adorno, "that it is fragmentary and ran- dom, itself assumes the givenness of totality and . . . suggests that man is in control of totality. But the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eter- nal."

Roland Barthes said toward the end of his life that he had produced "only essays, an ambiguous genre in which analysis vies with writing." The rueful tone of this statement should not distract us from its pride. In Europe, the essay has provided those with philosophic minds, such as Barthes, Benjamin, Adorno, Cioran, Simone Weil, and Jürgen Habermas, the chance to be writers as well.

The unashamed subjectivity of the personal essay makes it less suspect in a mental climate in which people have learned to mistrust the "value- free, objective" claims of scholarship and science. Another intriguing fea- ture of the form for contemporary theorists and advocates of "process" writing is that it seems to lay bare its process as it goes along. I say "seems" because there is still a good deal of selection and art in this appearance of spontaneous process. Still, as Alexander Smith noted, "The

Still, we must not make excessive claims. The essay is not, for the most part, philosophy; nor is it yet science. How seriously ought we to take its claims of being experimental? It lacks the rigor of a laboratory experiment; it does not hold on to its hypotheses long enough to prove them. But it is what it is: a mode of inquiry, another way of getting at the truth.

As one pedagogic champion of the personal essay, William Zeiger, put it,

The practice of experimenting, or trying something out, is expressed in the now uncommon sense of the verb to *prove*—the sense of “testing” rather than of “demonstrating validity.” Montaigne “proved” his ideas in that he tried them out in his essays. He spun out their implications, sampled their suggestions. He did not argue or try to persuade. He had no investment in winning over his audience to his opinion; accordingly, he had no fear of being refuted. On the contrary, he expected that some of the ideas he expressed would change, as they did in later essays. Refutation represented not a personal defeat but an advance toward truth as valuable as confirmation. To “prove” an idea, for Montaigne, was to examine it in order to *find out* how true it was.

The Rationale and Arrangement of This Book

This volume is divided into five sections, which attempt to uncover the *tradition* of the personal essay. One reason to consider it a tradition is that its practitioners were often so aware of and quick to comment on one another's work. Montaigne writes about Seneca and Plutarch, Cowley and Hazlitt about Montaigne, Stevenson and Woolf about Hazlitt, Kenko about Shonagon, and so on. It is as though a like-minded tribe of writers sought each other out over the centuries, clinging to the seashell sound of intimacy, candor, and irony that corroborated their own voices.

As part of this conversation with their ancestors, the new practitioners made their own attempts at themes favored in the personal essay tradition: friendship, solitude, attachment to the past, childhood; talk, social manners, and the folly of fashion; city versus country life, walking, idleness, travel, hobbies; collecting, public spectacles, and entertainments; books, the vocation of writing, food, appetites, interior decor; illness, mortality. The list is short on war, apocalypse, zeal, the grotesque. Even in periods of extreme upheaval, the personal essayist tends to cling to the familiar and domestic, the emotional middle of the road—not necessarily because he or she is lucky enough to have been spared tragedy, but perhaps the opposite. Charles Lamb saw his sister stab their mother to death and never

essayist gives you his thoughts, and lets you know, in addition, how he came by them.” This honoring of the thought as it pops up lends a watercolorist's freshness to the form.

Naturally, essayists who honor the flow of their thoughts may often end up contradicting themselves. But what would be a flaw in the systems-building philosopher may be an essential step for the essayist. As F. Scott Fitzgerald said, paraphrasing Keats' idea of negative capability, “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.” The essay's capacity for processing doubt is part of what makes it so stimulating and tonic.

This tolerance for contradiction also puts an added pressure on the essayist, according to Adorno: “The slightly yielding quality of the essayist's thought forces him to greater intensity than discursive thought can offer; for the essay, unlike discursive thought, does not proceed blindly, automatically, but at every moment it must reflect on itself.” Here, O. B. Hardison, Jr.'s definition of the essay seems particularly apt: “The essay is the enactment of a process by which the soul realizes itself even as it is passing from day to day and from moment to moment.”

The self-consciousness and self-reflection that essay writing demands cannot help but have an influence on the personal essayist's life. Montaigne confessed at one point that “in modelling this figure upon myself, I have had to fashion and compose myself so often to bring myself out, that the model itself has to some extent grown firm and taken shape. Painting myself for others, I have painted my inward self with colors clearer than my original ones. I have no more made my book than my book has made me.” Thus the writing of personal essays not only monitors the self but helps it gel. The essay is an enactment of the creation of the self.

“I write what I please,” stated George Orwell. Whether entirely true or not, this represents the ideal mental condition of the personal essayist, the same one enunciated by Hazlitt when he wrote, “No one has said to me, *Believe this, do that, say what we would have you; no one has come between me and my free-will; I have breathed the very air of truth and independence.*”

In the final analysis, the personal essay represents a mode of being. It points a way for the self to function with relative freedom in an uncertain world. Skeptical yet gyroscopically poised, undecieved but finally tolerant of flaws and inconsistencies, this mode of being suits the modern existential situation, which Montaigne first diagnosed. His recognition that human beings were surrounded by darkness, with nothing particularly solid to cling to, led to a philosophical acceptance that one had to make oneself up from moment to moment.

programs. Twain and Thoreau were writing in the 1800s what would now be called creative nonfiction; H. L. Mencken, James Thurber, James Baldwin, and others were writing creative nonfiction throughout the 1900s. My favorite creative nonfiction writer, E. B. White, was just finishing up his fifty-year career in 1976, about the time I graduated from high school. Creative nonfiction has a rich history. I see no reason to ignore it and pretend we are breaking new ground with a new kind of literature.

Two pieces of advice have served me well as a writer: the first is to read a lot; the second is to write a lot (and don't assume your creative writing instructors have all the right answers).

Delivering Lily

PHILLIP LOPATE

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Ever since expectant fathers were admitted into delivery rooms a few decades ago, they have come armed with video cameras and awe. Before I became a father, I often heard men describe seeing the birth of their baby as "transcendental," the greatest experience in their lives. They would recall how choked up they got, even boast about their tears . . . it sounded very kitschy, like the ultimate sunrise. Being a nontranscendentalist, with suspicions, moreover, about my affective capacities, I was unsure how I would react. I had seen birthing scenes often enough in movies: how much more surprising could the reality be? I wondered, as someone who used to pass out at the sight of my own blood filling syringes, would I prove useless and faint? Or would I rise to the occasion, and be so moved in the bargain that at last I could retire those definitions of myself as a detached skeptic and accept the sweet, decent guy allegedly underneath?

Whatever reactions would befall me, I prepared myself for a

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PHILLIP LOPATE's recent books include *Getting Personal: Selected Writings*, *Waterfront: A Journey Around Manhattan*, and *Rudy Burckhardt*.

minor role. The star of any birth is the mother, her costar, Baby, her supporting leads, the medics. At nativity, every father feels himself a Joseph.

September 16, 1994, around four in the afternoon, I came across my wife, Cheryl, lying on the couch. She said she had "spotted" earlier, and wondered if this teaspoon's worth of sanguinous discharge could be what the books referred to, more scarletly, as "the bloody show."

I had already made a date with a friend—poet and fellow Brooklynite Harvey Shapiro—to attend the end of Yom Kippur services at the local temple, after which I was to bring Harvey back to our house to break fast together. Harvey would supply the traditional challah bread and herring, and Cheryl the rest of the meal. I promised her I would return with Harvey no later than seven.

At the Kane Street Synagogue, the rabbi was taking her own sweet time, and I knew Cheryl would be annoyed if her dinner got cold, so I prevailed on Harvey to leave the service early. Just as well. We were sitting around the table, getting ready to enjoy Cheryl's lamb and baked potatoes, when she pointed mysteriously to her belly.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I think it's starting."

She smiled. If it was indeed starting, she could skip her appointment the following week for an artificial induction. The fetus was at a good weight, and the doctors hadn't wanted to take the chance of the placenta breaking down, as happened often with overdue deliveries. Cheryl had felt sad at the thought of being artificially induced—missing the suspense of those first contractions—but now the baby seemed to be arriving on her

due date, which meant we were in for the whole "natural" experience after all.

First-time parents, we had wondered whether we would really be able to tell when it was time. Would we embarrass ourselves by rushing off to the hospital days early, at the first false quiver? How to be sure whether the sensations Cheryl reported were the contractions? As instructed, we began timing them. Meanwhile, our downstairs neighbor Beth popped in, and stayed to witness potential history.

Harvey, a man in his late sixties and a grizzled veteran of parenthood, distracted us with stories of his boys' infancies while I kept my eye on the second hand. The contractions seemed to be spaced between five and seven minutes apart. We phoned our obstetricians. The office was closed for the Jewish holiday, but the answering service relayed the message to Dr. Arita, who was on call that night. Dr. Arita told Cheryl not to come into the hospital until contractions began occurring regularly, at five minutes apart, and lasted a full minute.

As soon as we had clocked two one-minute contractions in a row, I was impatient to start for the hospital. I had no wish to deliver a baby on the kitchen floor. Cheryl seemed calmer as she described her condition to Dr. Arita. It was now 10 p.m., and he told her she would probably be coming into the hospital "some time that night." This phraseology sounded too vague to me. I marveled at my wife's self-possessed demeanor. Cheryl was manifesting her sweet, lovely, modest, cheerfully plucky side—the side she presented to my friends and to outsiders; it was not a lie, but it gave no hint of her other self, that anxious, morose perfectionist she often produced when we were alone.

At ten-thirty the contractions began to arrive five minutes apart, and with more sharpness. Arita, beeped, said to come in. I pulled together a few last items (rubber ball, ice pack) on the

checklist of what to take to the delivery room, and, saying good-bye to our guests, had gotten halfway to the door when I noticed Cheryl was, as usual, not quite ready to leave the house. She decided she had to water the mums.

For months, we had debated which neighborhood car service to call for the hour-long trip from Carroll Gardens to Mount Sinai Hospital, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Cheryl, a superb driver with no faith in my own lesser automotive skills, had even considered taking the wheel herself when the time came. Now suddenly she turned to me and said, "You drive. Just don't speed."

I maneuvered the car with caution over the Brooklyn Bridge, then up the FDR Drive, while Cheryl spoke happily of feeling empowered and in control. The contractions, she said, were not that painful: "I like these intense experiences that put you in contact with life and death." Premature bravado, I thought, but kept this to myself, glad to have her confidently chatting away; it meant she wouldn't have as much chance to find fault with my driving.

We parked the car in the hospital's indoor lot. Cheryl began walking very slowly up the ramp, holding her back. "I can't walk any faster," she snapped (the first sign of a change in mood?), as if responding to an unspoken criticism she sensed me making about her pace, when in fact I was stumbling all over myself to support her.

It was close to midnight as we entered the eerily quiet Klingenstein Pavilion. I approached the security guard, busy flirting with a nurse's aide, for directions. We had preregistered weeks before to avoid red tape at zero hour. After signing in, we were directed down a long creepy corridor into Birthing Room C. Mount Sinai Hospital has one of the largest maternity wards in the country, which is one reason we chose it; but suddenly its

very magnitude made us uneasy. We felt no longer dramatic or special, but merely one more on the assembly line, popping babies up and down the hall.

The expectant couple was deposited in Room C, and left alone. It would be difficult to describe Room C except in regard to absences: it was not cozy, it was not charming, it was not tiny, it was not big, it was not even decrepit, it had nothing for the eye to fasten on. It was what you expected, more or less, of an anonymous hospital room with a quick turnover; but Cheryl, I sensed, had hoped for more—more ambience, amenities, *something* for the money. A visual designer by trade, she could, I knew, be preternaturally sensitive to new environments. Like a bride who finds herself in a nondescript wedding chapel, Cheryl may have long nurtured a fantasy of the ideal first-time birthing chamber, and something told me this was not it.

Often I allow myself to be made captive of my wife's moods, registering in an instant her first signs of discontent and trying (usually without success) to gentle her out of it. I suspect that this catering to her anxiety—if only by playing the optimist to her pessimist—is really laziness on my part: It saves me the trouble of having to initiate emotions on my own.

Cheryl was given a hospital gown to wear. The moment she put it on, her confidence evaporated. She became an object, a thing to cut open. I cast about for ways to regain the light mood we had had in the car, but it was no use. "Let's get out of this room. It gives me the willies," she said.

We went for a walk around the ward, opening doors and peering inside like naughty children. Our best discovery was a conference room, dark and coffee-machined and air-conditioned—freezing, in fact—which suited her just fine. We hid out for fifteen minutes in this nonmedical haven. But her contractions eventually drove us back to Room C.

cap, which suggested he had come straight from surgery; this fashion accessory, I was happy to see, reduced somewhat his matinee-idol appeal.

It was Dr. Arita who had, months before, performed the amniocentesis, which ascertained among other things that our baby was to be a girl. Dr. Arita had a clinical terseness, never taking five words to say what four could accomplish. He asked Cheryl if she wanted Demerol to cut the pain and help her sleep.

Cheryl had her speech all ready. "No, I don't want Demerol. Demerol will make me groggy. It'll turn my brain to mush, and I hate that sensation."

"All right. If you change your mind, let me know." With those succinct words, he exited.

From time to time a nurse would see how Cheryl was getting along. Or the resident on the floor would pop in and say, "You're doing great, you're doing great!" Increasingly, Cheryl wasn't. Her contractions had become much more intense, and she began making a gesture with her hands of climbing the wall of pain, reaching her arms toward the ceiling. Finally she cried out:

"Painkiller. Painkiller. DEMEROL."

I ran to fetch the resident.

"I'd give it to my wife," he said, which seemed to soothe Cheryl somewhat. Exhausted by her pain, she had entered a cone of self-absorption, and only a doctor's or nurse's words seemed able to reach her. She had tuned me out, I thought, except as a potential irritant—a lowly servant who was not doing his job. "More ice," she said, rattling the cup as though scornful of the lousy service in this joint.

During prenatal Lamaze pep talks, the husband was always being built up as an essential partner in the birthing process.

Cheryl lay down. She took an instant dislike to her berth, saying, "I don't like this bed!" and fiddling with the dials to raise and lower it (an aversion, I thought, to proneness itself, which brought with it the surrender of her last sense of control). I turned on the TV to distract her. The second half of *Working Girl*, with Melanie Griffith, was on; Cheryl said she didn't want to hear the dialogue, so I was just to keep the sound loud enough to provide a background of "white noise." This was certainly a temperamental difference between us: if I had been giving birth, whatever the ordeal, I think I would have wanted the dialogue as well as the visuals of the movie on television. But I obliged; besides, we had already seen it.

For some reason, I had imagined our being swamped by medical personnel the moment we entered the hospital. We had not anticipated these quarter hours of waiting alone, without instructions. We sat about like useless tourists who arrive in an economy hotel after a long trip, too tired to attempt the streets of a foreign city, yet too hemmed in by the unlovely room to enjoy a siesta.

How glad we were to see Dr. Arita walk in! A silver-mustached, suavely Latin, aristocratic type, he was one of Cheryl's favorites on the team. (She had been instructed to "establish a rapport" with all four obstetricians, since you never knew who was going to be on call during the actual delivery.) Cheryl had once admitted to me she thought Arita handsome, which made me a little jealous of him. He wore the standard green cotton scrubs with "Property of Mt. Sinai Hospital" printed on the material (still wrinkled, pulled straight from the dryer, no doubt: in former times, they would have been crisply ironed, to maintain authority and morale) and, improbably, had on a shower

★ This propaganda about the husband's importance, the misplaced fallout of equal sharing of domestic responsibilities in modern marriage, struck me as bunk, since the husband's parturient chores appeared menial at best. One of my spousal duties was to replenish the ice that Cheryl sucked on or rubbed across her forehead. Throughout the night I made a dozen of these ice runs, dashing into the kitchenette and filling the cup with chips. Back in the room, Cheryl would cry out "Ice," then "Ice, ice!" with mounting urgency, as though the seconds between her request and my compliance were an eternity marking my bottomless clumsiness. I was rushing as fast as I could (though I must confess that when someone yells at me to fetch something or perform any manual action, it releases a slight physical hesitation on my part, perhaps no longer than 1.5 seconds, but this 1.5-second delay was enough to drive Cheryl wild. It is, you might say, the 1.5-second factor that makes conjugal life so continuously absorbing). Also, if I gave her a piece she deemed too small or too large, she would berate me in tones of "How could you be so stupid?" This went on for hours.

Her underlying reproach seemed to be that I was not hooked into her brain—was not able to anticipate her needs through ESP or heightened sensitivity—and she would have to waste precious breath articulating them. I would occasionally try to ease the tension by giving her a neck rub or caressing her hand, all recommended consolations by the Lamaze instructor. She shook me off like a cockroach. We husbands had been instructed as well to make "eye contact" with our wives: but whenever I tried this, Cheryl acquired the look of a runaway horse made acutely distressed by an unwanted obstacle in her path.

Sadly, I was not sufficiently generous to rise above feelings of being unfairly attacked. Days later, it surprised me to hear Cheryl telling people I had been wonderful during labor: "like a rock."

Why, if this was so, I asked her, had she been so mean to me at the time? She explained rather reasonably that she was just taking her pain and putting it on me as fast as possible.

Sometimes, during contractions, she would literally transfer her pain to me by gouging my leg. Mistakenly thinking she was attached to my foot, I offered it to her, only to have it pushed away. "No, not the foot, I don't want the foot, I want the hand!" she screamed. (Being abnormally sensitive to smells all during pregnancy, she had picked up an unpleasant odor from my socks.)

What she liked best, it turned out, was to grip my trousers belt and yank hard. Eventually we worked out a routine: as soon as she started climbing a contraction, I would jump out of my chair, which was on her left side, run over to her right side, and stand beside her as she pulled and thrashed at my belt for the duration of the spasm. All the while I would be counting off every five seconds of the contraction. I was not entirely sure what purpose I served by counting aloud in this fashion; they had told us husbands to do so in Lamaze class, in connection with certain breathing exercises, but since we had thrown those exercises out the window soon after coming to the hospital, why, I wondered, was it necessary to keep up a count?

I should explain that we had never been ideal Lamaze students. Too preoccupied with our lives to practice the breathing regularly at home, or perhaps unable to overcome the feeling that it was a bit silly, when the actual labor came, it was so unremitting that we could not be bothered trying to execute these elegant respiratory tempi. It would be like asking a drowning woman to waltz. Cheryl continued to breathe, willy-nilly; that seemed enough for both of us. (I can hear the Lamaze people saying: Yes, but if only you had followed our instructions, it would have gone so much easier. . . .) In any event, I would call out bogus numbers to please Cheryl, sensing that the real point

of this exercise was for her to have the reassurance of my voice, measuring points on the arc of her pain, as proof that I was equally focused with her on the same experience.

In spite of, or because of, this excruciating workout, we were both getting very sleepy. The wee hours of the morning, from 2 to 6 a.m., saw the surreal mixture of agony merging with drowsiness. Cheryl would be contorted with pain, and I could barely stop yawning in her face. She too would doze off, between contractions: waking suddenly as though finding herself on a steeply ascending roller coaster, she would yowl *Oooowwwww!* I'd snap awake, stare at my watch, call out a number, rush to the other side of the bed and present my belt for yanking. When it was over I would go back to my chair, and nod off again, to the sound of some ancient TV rerun. I recall Erik Estrada hopping on a motorcycle in *CHiPS*, and *Hawaii Five-O's* lead-in music; and early morning catnap dreams punctuated by a long spate of CNN, discussing the imminent invasion of Haiti; then CBS News, Dan Rather's interview with the imperturbable dictator Raoul Cedras, and "Ice, ice!"

During this long night, Cheryl put her head against my shoulder and I stroked her hair for a long while. This tenderness was as much a part of the experience as the irritation, though I seem to recall it less. It went without saying that we loved each other, were tied together; and perhaps the true meaning of intimacy was not to have to put on a mask of courtesy in situations like these.

Demerol had failed to kill the pain: Cheryl began screaming "PAINKILLER, PAINKILLER, HELP," in that telegraphic style dictated by her contractions. I tracked down the resident and got him to give her a second dose of Demerol. But less than an hour

after, her pain had reached a knuckle-biting pitch beyond Demerol's ministrations. At six in the morning, I begged the doctors to administer an epidural, which would numb Cheryl from the waist down. "Epidural"—the open sesame we had committed to memory in the unlikely event of unbearable pain—was guaranteed to be effective, but the doctors tried to defer this as long as possible, because the numbness in her legs would make it harder to push the baby out during the active phase. (My mind was too fatigued to grasp ironies, but it perked up at this word "active," which implied that all the harsh turmoil Cheryl and I had undergone for what seemed like forever was merely the latent, "passive" phase of labor.)

The problem, the reason the labor was taking so long, was that while Cheryl had entered the hospital with a membrane 80 percent "effaced," her cervix was still very tight, dilated only one centimeter. From midnight to about five in the morning, the area had expanded from one to only two centimeters; she needed to get to ten centimeters before delivery could occur. To speed the process, she was now given an inducement drug, Proactin—a very small amount, since this medication is powerful enough to cause seizures. The anesthesiologist also hooked Cheryl up to an IV for her epidural, which was to be administered by drops, not all at once, so that it would last longer.

Blessedly, it did its job.

Around seven in the morning Cheryl was much calmer, thanks to the epidural. She sent me out to get some breakfast. I never would have forgiven myself if I had missed the baby's birth while dallying over coffee, but Cheryl's small dilation encouraged me to take the chance. Around the corner from the hospital was a Greek coffee shop, Peter's, where I repaired and ate a cheese omelette and read the morning *Times*. I can't remember if I did the crossword puzzle: knowing me, I probably did, relishing

these quiet forty minutes away from the hospital, and counting on them to refresh me for whatever exertions lay ahead.

Back on the floor, I ran into Dr. Raymond Sandler, Cheryl's favorite obstetrician on the team. Youthfully gray-haired, with a melodious South African accent and kind brown eyes, he said the same things the other doctors did, but they came out sounding warmer. Now, munching on some food, he said, "She looks good!" Dr. Sandler thought the baby would come out by noon. If so, delivery would occur during his shift. I rushed off to tell Cheryl the good news.

Momentarily not in pain, she smiled weakly as I held her hand. Our attention drifted to the morning talk shows. (Cheryl had long ago permitted me to turn up the volume.) Redheaded Marilu Henner was asking three gorgeous soap opera actresses how they kept the zip in their marriage. What were their secret ways of turning on their husbands? One had the honesty to admit that ever since the arrival of their baby, sex had taken a backseat to exhaustion and nursing. I liked her for saying that, wondering at the same time what sacrifices were in store for Cheryl and me. Marilu (I had never watched her show before, but now I felt like a regular) moved on to the question, what first attracted each woman to her husband. "His tight buns." The audience loved it. I glanced over at Cheryl, to see how she was taking this: she was leaning to one side with a concentrated expression of oncoming nausea, her normally beautiful face looking drawn, hatchet-thin. She seemed to defy the laws of perspective: a Giacometti face floating above a Botero stomach.

We were less like lovers at that moment than like two soldiers who had marched all night and fallen out, panting, by the side of the road. The titillations of the TV show could have come from another planet, so far removed did it feel from

us; that eros had gotten us here in the first place seemed a rumor at best.

Stubbornly, in this antiseptic, torture-witnessing cubicle, I tried to recover the memory of sexual feeling. I thought about how often we'd made love in order to conceive this baby—every other night, just to be on the safe side, during the key weeks of the month. At first we were frisky, reveling in it like newweds. Later, it became another chore to perform, like moving the car for alternate-side-of-the-street parking, but with the added fear that all our efforts might be in vain. Cheryl was thirty-eight, I was fifty. We knew many other couples around our age who were trying, often futilely, to conceive—a whole generation, it sometimes seemed, of careerists who had put off childbearing for years, and now wanted more than anything a child of their own, and were deep into sperm motility tests, in vitro fertilizations, and the lot. After seven months of using the traditional method, and suffering one miscarriage in the process, we were just about to turn ourselves over like lab rats to the fertility experts when Cheryl got pregnant. This time it took. Whatever torment labor brought, we could never forget for a moment how privileged we were to be here.

"You've got to decide about her middle name!" Cheryl said with groggy insistence, breaking the silence.

"Okay. Just relax, we will."

"Elena? Francesca? Come on, Phillip, we've got to get this taken care of or we'll be screwed."

"We won't be 'screwed.' If worse comes to worst, I'll put both names down."

"But we have to make up our minds. We can't just—"

"Well, which name do you prefer?"

"I can't think straight now."

A new nurse came on the day shift: a strong, skillful West Indian woman named Jackie, who looked only about forty but who told us later that she was a grandmother. As it turned out, she would stay with us to the end, and we would become abjectly dependent on her—this stranger who had meant nothing to us a day before, and whom we would never see again.

At nine centimeters' dilation, and with Jackie's help, Cheryl started to push. "Pretend you are going to the toilet," Jackie told Cheryl, who obeyed; evacuating a foul-smelling liquid.

"She made a bowel movement, that's good," Dr. Sandler commented in his reassuring way. Jackie wiped it up with a tow-lette, and we waited for the next contraction. Jackie would say with her island accent, "Push, push in the bottom," calling to my mind that disco song, "Push, Push in the Bush." Cheryl would make a supreme effort. But now a new worry arose: the fetal monitor was reporting a slower heartbeat after each contraction, which suggested a decrease in the baby's oxygen. You could hear the baby's heartbeat amplified in the room, like rain on a tin roof, and every time the sound slowed down, you panicked.

Dr. Sandler ordered a blood sample taken from the infant's scalp, to see if she was properly aerated (i.e., getting enough oxygen). In addition, a second fetal monitor was attached to the fetus's scalp (don't ask me how). My poor baby, for whom it was not enough to undergo the birth trauma, was having to endure the added insult of getting bled while still in the womb.

The results of the blood test were positive: "Not to worry," Dr. Sandler said. But just in case, he ordered Cheryl to wear an oxygen mask for the remainder of the labor. This oxygen mask frightened us, with its bomb shelter associations.

"How will the baby be delivered?" Cheryl asked as the apparatus was placed over her face. "Will they have to use forceps?"

"That will depend on your pushing," answered Dr. Sandler,

and then he left. I did not like the self-righteous sound of this answer, implying it was ours to screw up or get right. We had entrusted ourselves to the medical profession precisely so that they could take care of everything for us!

Often, after a push, the tow-lette underneath Cheryl was spattered with blood. Jackie would swoop it up, throw it on the floor, kick it out of the way, raise Cheryl's lower half from the bed, and place a fresh tow-lette underneath. The floor began to smell like a battleground, with blood and shit underfoot.

"Push harder, push harder, harder, harder, harder," Jackie chanted in her Barbados accent. Then: "Keep going, keep going, keep going!" Cheryl's legs were floppy from the epidural; she reported a feeling of detachment from her body. In order for her to have a counterpressure to push against, I was instructed to lift her left leg and double it against the crook of my arm. This maneuver, more difficult than it sounds, had to be sustained for several hours; a few times I felt that my arm was going to snap and I might end up hospitalized as well. It was probably the hardest physical work I've ever done—though nothing compared, of course, to what Cheryl was going through. I feared she would burst a blood vessel.

Around eleven, Jackie went on her lunch break, replaced by a nurse who seemed much less willing to get involved. A tense conversation ensued between Dr. Sandler and the new nurse:

"This patient is fully effaced," he said.

"My other patient is fully, too."

He sighed, she shrugged, and the next minute they were both out the door. Left alone with a wife buckling in pain, I felt terrified and enraged: How dare Jackie take a food break now? Couldn't we page her in the cafeteria and tell her to get her ass back? It was no use, I had to guide Cheryl through her contractions as if I knew what I was doing. This meant watching the

fetal monitor printout for the start of each contraction (signaled by an elevating line), then lodging her leg against my arm and chanting her through the three requisite pushes per contraction, without any firm idea exactly when each was supposed to occur. The first time I did this I got so engrossed pressing her leg hard against me that I forgot the cheerleading. I have a tendency to fall silent during crises, conserving energy for stocktaking and observation. This time I was brought up short by Cheryl yelling at me: "How am I supposed to know how long to push?" I wanted to answer: I'm not a trained medic, I have no idea myself. The next time, however, I bluffed, "Push, push in the bottom!" doing my best Jackie imitation until Jackie herself came back.

Sometime near noon, Dr. Sandler made an appearance with his colleague, Dr. Schiller, and began explaining the case to her. Cheryl had never felt as confident about Laura Schiller as she had about Dr. Sandler and Dr. Arita, either because Dr. Schiller was the only woman on the team (not that Cheryl would have agreed with this explanation), or because Dr. Schiller had a skinny, birdlike, tightly wound manner that did not immediately inspire tranquillity, or because the two women had simply not had the opportunity to "develop a rapport." With a sinking sensation, we began to perceive that Dr. Sandler was abandoning us. Actually, he probably would have been happy to deliver Lily, if only she had arrived when he had predicted, before noon. Now he had to be somewhere else, so he turned the job over to his capable colleague.

Dr. Schiller brought in a younger woman—a resident or intern—and they discussed whether the baby was presenting OA or OR (whatever that meant). Now they turned to the expectant mother and got serious. Dr. Schiller proved to be a much tougher coach than Jackie. "Come on, Cheryl, you can try harder than that," she would say. Cheryl's face clouded over with intense

effort, her veins stood out, and half the time her push was judged effective, the other half, not. I could never fathom the criteria used to separate the successes from the failures; all I knew was that my wife is no shirker, and I resented anyone implying she was. If some of Cheryl's pushes lacked vigor, it was because the epidural had robbed her of sensation below, and because the long night of pain, wasted on a scarcely increased dilation, had sapped her strength.

Over the next hour, doctor's and patient's rhythms synchronized, until something like complete trust developed between them. Dr. Schiller cajoled; Cheryl responded. We were down to basics; the procedure of birth had never seemed so primitive. I couldn't believe that here we were in the post-industrial era, and the mother still had to push the fetus by monstrously demanding effort, fractions of an inch down the vaginal canal. It was amazing that the human race survived, given such a ponderous child-bearing method. With all of science's advances, delivering a baby still came down to three timeworn approaches: push, forceps, or Caesarean.

This particular baby, it seemed, did not want to cross the perineum. "If the baby's no closer after three more pushes," Dr. Schiller declared, "we're going to have to go to forceps."

Forceps would necessitate an episiotomy—a straight surgical cut of the pubic region to keep it from fraying and tearing further. An episiotomy also would leave Cheryl sore and unable to sit for weeks. Knowing that I would probably be accused of male insensitivity, and sensing my vote counted marginally at best, I nevertheless expressed a word in favor of forceps. Anything to shorten the ordeal and get the damn baby out. Cheryl had suffered painful contractions for eighteen hours, she was exhausted, I was spent—and I was dying with curiosity to see my little one! I couldn't take the suspense any longer—obviously not a

legitimate reason. Cheryl worried that the forceps might dent or misshape the baby's skull. Dr. Schiller explained that the chances of that occurring were very slight, given the improved design of modern instruments.

Cheryl pushed as hard as she could, three times, with a most desperate look in her eyes. No use.

"I always try to give a woman two hours at best to push the baby out. But if it doesn't work—then I go to forceps," Dr. Schiller said authoritatively. Cheryl looked defeated.

"Okay, we'll try one more time. But now you really have to push. Give me the push of the day."

The Push of the Day must have felt like a tsunami to Lily, but she clung to the side of her underwater cave.

They readied the scalpel for an episiotomy. I turned away: some things you can't bear to watch done to a loved one. Dr. Schiller, kneeling, looked inside Cheryl and cried out, "She's got tons of black hair!" Standing over her, I could make out nothing inside; the fact that someone had already peeked into the entranceway and seen my baby's locks made me restless to glimpse this fabled, dark-haired creature.

The last stage was surprisingly brief and anticlimactic. The doctors manipulated the forceps inside Cheryl, who pushed with all her might. Then I saw the black head come out, followed by a ruddy squirming body. Baby howled, angry and shocked to find herself airborne in such a place. It was such a relief I began to cry. Then I shook with laughter. All that anguish and grief and triumph just to extract a writhing jumbo shrimp—it was comic.

The doctor passed the newborn to her mother for inspection. She was (I may say objectively) very pretty: looked like a little Eskimo or Mexican babe, with her mop of black hair and squinting eyes. Something definitely Third World about her. An overgrown head on a scrawny trunk, she reversed her mother's

disproportions. A kiss from Cheryl, then she was taken off to the side of the room and laid on a weighing table (seven pounds four ounces) and given an Apgar inspection by Jackie, under a heat lamp. Lily Elena Francesca Lopate had all her fingers and toes, all her limbs, and obviously sound vocal cords. She sobbed like a whip-poor-will, then brayed in and out like an affronted donkey.

Abandoned. For, while Cheryl was being stitched up by Dr. Schiller (who suddenly seemed to us the best doctor in the world), Lily, the jewel, the prize, the cause of all this tumult, lay on the table, crying alone. I was too intimidated by hospital procedure to go over there and comfort her, and Cheryl obviously couldn't move, and Jackie had momentarily left the room. So Lily learned right away how fickle is the world's attention.

Dr. Schiller told Cheryl she would probably have hemorrhoids for a while, as a result of the episiotomy. Cheryl seemed glad enough that she had not died on the table. She had done her job, delivered up safely the nugget inside her. I admired her courage beyond anything I had ever seen.

Happy, relieved, physically wrung out: these were the initial reactions. For hours (I realized after the fact) I had been completely caught up in the struggle of labor, with no space left over for self-division. But that may have had more to do with the physically demanding nature of assisting a birth than with any "transcendental" wonderment about it. In fact it was less spiritually uplifting than something like boot camp. I felt as if I had gone through combat.

That night, home from the hospital, I noted in my diary all I could recall. Consulting that entry for this account, I see how blurred my understanding was—remains—by the minutiae of medical narrative. What does it all "mean," exactly? On the one hand, an experience so shocking and strange; on the other hand, so typical, so stupefyingly ordinary.

When people say that mothers don't "remember" the pain of labor, I think they mean that of course they remember, but the fact of the pain recedes next to the blessing of the child's presence on earth.

Odd: what I remember most clearly from that long night and day is the agitated *pas de deux* between Cheryl and me, holding ourselves up like marathon dancers, she cross at me for not getting her ice fast enough, me vexed at her for not appreciating that I was doing my best. Do I hold on to that memory because I can't take in the enormity of seeing a newborn burst onto the plane of existence, and so cut it down to the more mundane pattern of a couple's argument? Or is it because the tension between Cheryl and me that night pointed to a larger truth: that a woman giving birth finds herself inconso­lably isolated? Close as we normally were, she had entered an experience into which I could not follow her; the promise of marriage—that we would both remain psychically connected—was of necessity broken.

I remember Cheryl sitting up, half an hour after Lily was born, still trembling and shaking.

"That's natural, for the trembling to last awhile," said Dr. Schiller.

Weeks afterward, smiling and accepting congratulations, I continued to tremble from the violence of the baby's birth. In a way, I am still trembling from it. The only comparison that comes to mind, strangely enough, is when I was mugged in the street, and I felt a tremor looking over my shoulder, for months afterward. That time my back was violated by a knife; this time I watched Cheryl's body ripped apart by natural forces, and it was almost as if it was happening to me. I am inclined to say I envied her and wanted it to be happening to me—to feel that intense agony, for once—but that would be a lie, because at the time, not for one second did I wish I were in Cheryl's place. Orthodox Jews

are taken to task for their daily prayer, "Thank God I am not a woman." And they should be criticized, since it is a crude, chauvinistic thought; but it is also an understandable one in certain situations, and I found myself viscerally "praying" something like that, while trying to assist Cheryl in her pushes.

Thank God I am not someone else. Thank God I am only who I am. These are the thoughts that simultaneously create and imprison the self. If ego is a poisonous disease (and it is), it is one I unfortunately trust more than its cure. I began as a detached skeptic and was shoved by the long night into an unwilling empathy, which saw Cheryl as a part of me, or me of her, for maybe a hundred seconds in all, before returning to a more self-protective distance. Detachment stands midway between two poles: at one end, solipsism; at the other end, wisdom. Those of us who are only halfway to wisdom know how close we still lean toward the chillness of solipsism.

It is too early to speak of Lily. This charming young lady, willful, passionate, and insisting on engagement on her terms, who has already taught me more about unguarded love and the dread meaning of responsibility than I ever hoped to learn, may finally convince me there are other human beings as real as myself.

PHILLIP LOPATE ON "Delivering Lily"

What pleases me most about how "Delivering Lily" turned out is that I finished the essay at all. It also has some moments of uncomfortable honesty that please me. I'm not sure I succeeded in welding a narrative and an analytical piece: I felt too much at the mercy of reporting the "facts" and can't tell if the power of the event comes through on the page.

I initially thought I would write a much longer essay on Lily's first year. Her birth was supposed to be a prologue, but took over. Also, I hadn't known I would reach the conclusion I did about solipsism. Maybe I feel more comfortable writing essays than poetry or fiction because I don't have to work myself into quite as emotional or "inspirational" a state; I can be cooler, more rational, and trust more to analysis than invention. I've written about the emergence of creative nonfiction in my anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay*. As a form, it is obviously drawing a lot of interest: more memoir pieces than Montaignean reflections, alas. In my own writing, I use all the literary techniques I can: scenes, dialogue, conversational address to the reader, humor, philosophy, sensuous detail. Anything that will bring the piece alive.

My advice to young writers is that if you can't not write, go to it. But don't quit your day job.