

American Essayist

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THE PERSONAL essay has always ranked among the most democratic and forgiving of literary forms, available in theory to anyone with sufficient resources to muster an interesting written voice. In recent years, however, the genre has metastasized with bewildering speed and variety. Whether the result of the compulsively confessional mood of the '80s, the blurring of authorial categories under New Journalism or the boom in college writing programmes which have substituted an efficient factory model for the dourly solitary drudgings of creation, the average reader now confronts a wider array of people talking about themselves than ever before in history.

It goes without saying that most of these attempts are lightweight at best, and at their worst unreadable. Cluttering the columns of men's and women's magazines are amateurishly vivacious first-person dilations on the state of one's wardrobe, neighbourhood, snow tyres, heart or pet dog, set down without rigour and challenging no one and nothing at all, unless it's the reader's already shrunken attention span.

The form itself is a venerable one, however, with roots in the gravelly avuncular voice of Montaigne and its own Golden Age in Georgian England during the 18th and early 19th centuries, when the rise of periodical literature attracted some of the finest and most supple minds to the digressive pleasures of the genre. Addison, Steele, Lamb, Hunt and Hazlitt were merely the brightest stars in an entire galaxy of writers, emboldened by nascent Romantic ideas about the value of the inner life, who first put their psyches on public view.

In America, by contrast, the personal essay has had a rougher time of it. The sheer sprawl and rawness of the young country hampered that mode of elegant presumption which is at the heart of the essay, and condemned early practitioners to parasitic dependence on the sermon (Jonathan Edwards, Cotton Mather) or caused them to fall prey to a nearly terminal attack of moral uplift (Benjamin Franklin). Washington Irving and the Transcendentalists were strong exceptions, but it was not until the mid—20th century that the personal essay ripened to representative maturity in America, with writers like James Baldwin, Paul Goodman, Elizabeth Hardwick, Mary McCarthy, Susan Sontag, and not least, E.B. White, “The Dean of the American Essay,” who left as his legacy a perfect small-scale portrait of the Yankee gentleman under fire by modernity, drawn in some of the most carefully fluent sentences in the language.

IN 1981 Philip Lopate threw his hat into the essayistic ring with a collection entitled *Bachelorhood*. It was a book striking for the mix of its candour, psychological aptitude and narrative gifts, and for its style, which was refreshingly accessible and unadorned. Though, the essays were occasionally cumbered by their desire to present bottom-line truths, the collection was distinctive, and promised something of substantial future interest.

It is safe to say that with his new book Philip Lopate has arrived. *Against Joie de Vivre* presents a voice of the same intelligence as previously but ampler, lithier, more resonant in its nuance. It speaks in sentences of greater complexity, from within a vaster culture. For Lopate, in this collection even more than his last, writes as a “generalist,” that species of academic manqué (two examples are Edmund Wilson and Kenneth Rexroth) who forgoes the protection of a scholarly specialty and organizes knowledge along the live circuits of his own curiosity. Though Lopate speaks with authority on architecture, urban design, literature and film, he carries his erudition lightly, obeys the cardinal rule of the essay — style above all— and provides the readerly experience of a particularly good, particularly meaty conversation.

The prevailing tone is the chipper-elegiac, a disciplined and alert enthusiasm working against an undertow of sadness. “Keep busy, I always say. At all costs avoid the trough of passivity, which leads to the Slough of Despond.” This advice, from the title essay, a witty debunking of the American mania for forced dinner party gaiety and programmatic cheer, is clearly the fruit of hard-earned personal experience.

Lopate, who is of a psychological bent, writes in many of the essays as a sleuth of human motive, analysing the roots of casual behaviour and searching for the latencies hidden beneath the obvious. This vigilant habit of mind is turned as much on himself as on others, and makes him particularly good at describing those small-scale emotional economies which accrue around things like shaving a beard, subletting an apartment, or *Waiting For the Book to Come Out*. When he turns to the more extended formal essay he employs considerable gifts of scholarship, and shows a flair for mixing tracts of personal narrative into the body of his argument that, in more mild fashion, recalls the punchy essayistic weave of Orwell. Both men often begin their pieces with an innocent preamble of family reminiscence or a chatty bit of confessional flavoured assertion, which sets the reader up for the sustained deepening of tone to follow.

PARTICULARLY successful examples of this hybrid essay form are “Samson and Delilah and the Kids” (an examination of the Samson myth in literature and film, twined, characteristically, around memories of a movie-mad childhood), the title essay, and two linked essays entitled “Only Make Believe: Some Observations on Architectural Language” and “Houston Hide and Seek.” The first provides a funny and somewhat pained dissection of architecture’s runaway tendency towards literary metaphor; the second describes the decline of Houston and the disappearance of its old city at the hands of greedy developers and amnesiac nouveau-riche — a chronicle that Lopate fills in all its depressing detail.

Then there is the language. From the demotic and slangy to the argumentatively austere, the book revels in it. The prose can turn epigrammatic: “Alertness is all right as long as it’s not treated as a promissory note on happiness.” Or wax lyrical: “I was coming home to the body of Woman, those globes and grasses that had launched me.” Or even attain to the professorial with a sentence like, “A new-primitive, mythologizing subtext is also involved in this metaphor.” On the down side, the writing occasionally betrays the feeling of having been vitaminized by hand, force fed its dependent clauses and

hyphenated constructions. For the most part, however, the sentences, even in the coils of debate, remain swift and precise.

What, one may fairly ask, is the vision for which all this technique, all this wide-ranging information and sincerity have been enlisted? It would be hard to say conclusively, for like a large, well-written novel whose gathering narrative momentum breaks down critical response over time, Lopate's book with its alternation of carefully treated mundane subjects and weighty themes, comes eventually to exert a disarming effect upon the reader. We can say the mind on display is humane, if by that we mean judicious, candid, clear and flexible; that it is committed to civility, to the dignity of culture and critical inquiry. But how can one pigeonhole an erudite author who writes one of his most moving and engrossing essays on directing a production of *Uncle Vanya* with 11-year-old schoolkid actors? Or who, in a piece on his cranky landlady, devotes nearly five pages to a first-person soliloquy in the voice of the old woman herself?

His patience, his industry and his courage- for it is that- in producing writing of such simultaneous vulnerability and formal rigour, have earned him a niche at the very front rank of contemporary essayists. *Against Joie de Vivre* widens that niche considerably.