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THE ESSAY CANON

Lynn Z. Bloom

This study began with two seemingly simple questions, “What essays do people read and where?” The short answer—and my thesis—is: “Those Americans who read essays at all find them reprinted in Readers, anthologies intended for freshman composition.” No matter where an essay first appeared—in the *New Yorker* or a little magazine or on a newspaper’s op-ed page—if it is to survive in the hearts and minds of the twentieth-century American reading public it must be reprinted time and again in a composition Reader (capitalized to distinguish it from the book’s human reader). This article introduces the only essay canon to be publicly identified in the twentieth century. It is a *teaching* canon as distinct from a *critical* canon.

Canon-makers make pronouncements and lists. Although I am not now and never have been related to any other Bloom of canonical persuasion, neither Harold (“Read my list!”) nor Allan (“Read Great Books!”), I make the following claims. This article is the first to define this—or any—contemporary essay canon, the first to define that canon empirically rather than critically, and the first to discuss its formation, significance, status, and implications. Whether or not critics pay attention to essays, teachers do, and consequently so do their students. Thus this contemporary essay canon has profound implications—intellectual, aesthetic, pedagogical, and political—not only for what but also for how our nation’s 2.2 million first-year college students read, and think, and write—and for how they’ll think about reading and

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writing for the rest of their lives. The teaching essay canon may, indeed, constitute the core of a liberal education for many of these students.

Consequently, we must bring to the forefront of our pedagogical consciousness what has to date been shoved to the dim recesses of the shelves loaded with fiction, poetry, and drama. A few essayists were assigned canonical status by scholars focusing critical and curricular attention on particular sorts of belletristic short nonfiction prose by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century white male British writers (see Golding; Rasula; McQuade), but the empirically defined essay canon depends on the sheer frequency with which particular works have appeared in a half century of Readers. It was formed by diverse post-World War II composition teachers, acting independently or in collaboration with publishers, who compiled various configurations of short nonfiction pieces to be used as stimuli for class discussions and as models for student writing—on the whole, a democratic rather than an elitist process. By making visible what our left hands have been doing in the composition classroom while our right hands are transacting the academy's literary business, this article provides the intellectual basis necessary to reexamine the common substance of the American university's most common course.

Thus this article will survey the vast territory of essays—they are all over the map—and sketch out some of its major dimensions. Part 1, “Canons and the Essay Canon,” explores the relation of essays to canon theory, explains why the only essay canon is a powerful teaching canon, and defines the essay canon operationally. Part 2, “Researching the Essay Canon,” discusses my research method. Part 3, “How Essays Become Canonical,” shows where essays live, how they arrive in the teaching canon, and why they stay there. Part 4, “The Essay Canon and Implications for Undergraduate Education,” examines how essays are taught and what that teaching implies. Part 5, “The Future of the Essay Canon,” concludes with a largely hopeful observation on the current status of the essay in and out of the academy. To anticipate, it is, as Joseph Epstein has observed, “a sweet time to be an essayist” (411).

1. CANONS AND THE ESSAY CANON

In *Contingencies of Value*, Barbara Herrnstein Smith offers an exhaustive list of the “diverse forms of evaluation” of a literary work. Among the kinds of literary canons she identifies are critical canons (which include *historical*, *national*, and *cultural* canons, such as Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*, often presented as if they were universal) and the teaching canon (sometimes called *pedagogical* or *institutional*) (42–53). Frank Kermode sees critical canons as “strategic constructs by which societies maintain their own interests, since the canon allows control over the texts a culture takes seriously and the methods of interpretation that establish the meaning of ‘serious’” (qtd. in Altieri 42). Scholars and critics create the *critical canon* by publishing reviews and criticism, rank-orderings, evaluations and re-evaluations, and by

awarding prizes (Smith 45–46). Because, as Alan Golding observes, “any given period has its canonical genres; its canonical critical paradigms, or ways of seeing and reading” (59), the reinterpretations and reassessments of any powerful group, or even a single individual, can produce *revisionist canons* such as that promulgated by the multi-ethnic *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, its selection based, as general editor Paul Lauter explains, not “on that of previous anthologies or our graduate school training” but on a survey of “a new literary world. . . the vast range of the literary output of this country,” including a great deal of nonfiction prose (Preface xxxv). *Pedagogical canons* live and die in anthologies, curricula, syllabi, and reading lists (Smith 46; Golding 70–113; Rasula 415–69), as this article demonstrates with regard to the essay canon. Finally, in the larger world, best-sellers constitute what some might call an *economic canon*. Oprah Winfrey’s selection of a novel for her Book Club ensures million-dollar sales, which may make her the single most influential force in contemporary American belles lettres, the newest canon czar.

The canon, any canon, may be viewed as a map of the territory it claims to encompass. Yet for the canon czars who have dictated the shape and scope of the critical canon of American literature during the twentieth century, essays are nowhere. Even as recently as 1970, the critical canon included only a few essays, typically literary criticism by writers distinguished in other genres, such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Critics pay scant attention to individual essays or even to the *oeuvre* of renowned essayists. Jonathan Swift’s “Modest Proposal,” the most widely reprinted essay, has been the subject of thirty-eight critical or pedagogical works in the past twenty-five years. But E. B. White’s classic “Once More to the Lake” has elicited only five critical responses, George Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant” four; most other essayists and their works are in critical limbo (*MLA International Bibliography* 1963–98). The *historical canon* of nineteenth-century essayists has not survived in the twentieth-century pedagogical canon.

Teachers have more influence over the canon than they may realize. For the teaching canon is constructed, says Smith, when faculty compile anthologies, construct curricula, and draw up class reading lists (45–46) and, I would add, doctoral prelim lists—activities calculated to ensure the replication of these lists and the perpetuation of the canon in subsequent generations. A literary work gains value, as Smith explains, through “repeated inclusion” in literary anthologies and on reading lists, in addition to “frequent citation or quotation by professors, scholars, and academic critics” (46). To the extent that the critics and the teachers’ judgments are congruent—as in estimates, say, of Shakespeare, Hemingway, and Faulkner—the critical canon is the same as the teaching canon. But when teachers teach material ignored or undervalued by the critics, as in the case of essays, a canon emerges that is only tangentially related to collective critical judgment.

Given the essay’s absence from a large swath of our literature textbooks (“I wanted to include a whole section on belletristic essays,” says the editor of one 2,500-page

literature anthology, “but there wasn’t enough room”), and the fitful attention essays receive from critics, how can there be an essay canon? Students in the nation’s three thousand or so colleges and universities, even those who never meet a literature anthology, are almost sure to encounter essays in their required composition courses—most likely in Readers. With the exception of obvious works of fiction and poetry that occasionally appear in essay anthologies, for the purposes of the subsequent analysis I am including the entire contents of these Readers—all the variant forms of nonfiction and satire that they publish. In these Readers, then, an *essay*, for practical purposes, is any piece of relatively short nonfiction prose that the book’s editors select for their essay anthology—just as any piece of writing in a literature anthology is by definition *literature*. It is this operational definition that I will be using throughout the rest of my discussion of textbook Readers.

The critical definition of an essay as a short work of belletristic nonfiction that was understood throughout the formation of the nineteenth-century critical canon continues to prevail in contemporary critical discussions. From Montaigne’s definition of the essay as “a trial, an attempt,” through Adorno’s discrimination between essays and articles, to contemporary definitions by William Gass, Wendell Harris (“Reflections”), Phillip Lopate, and others, the essay is seen as representing ideas in an associative and open-ended process of exploration and development. However, my operational definition differs from all of these. The essay canon derived from the twentieth-century canonical freshman composition Readers contains diverse kinds of nonfiction: besides belletristic (or personal) essays and those informational or programmatic essays sometimes called articles, there are a variety of other nonfiction prose forms, including memoir and character sketch; travel narrative and natural history; cultural, social, and political analysis or advocacy; a miscellany of philosophical statements, science writing, literary criticism, editorials, research reports; and satires and speeches. Teachers and textbooks use *essay* as a catchall term, as I do throughout this paper. When I refer to *the essay canon* I mean the multiple works of *essayists* rather than individual essays, with a few exceptions, following the practice used in canonical studies of poets, who are conventionally represented by multiple poems rather than single works (see Harold Bloom 548–67; Golding; Rasula).

Indeed, most editors of canonical Readers are vague about both the term and the concept, and this is intentional. As one editor of a prominent anthology—who shall remain nameless—explained, “We try not to define *essay*. That way we don’t have to debate the status of Chief Seattle’s speech, the Declaration of Independence, James Thurber’s fables. We’re going to include them, anyway.” Even those Readers, such as the *Bedford Reader* and *Subject and Strategy*, that do define *essay* typically bury the definition in a glossary. As Randall Decker laments in *Patterns of Exposition*, “because of the wide and loose application of the term, no really satisfactory definition has been arrived at” (Glossary in all 14 editions—e.g. 4th ed. 351; emphasis added). Often editors substitute for *essays* textbook terms such as *selections*, *pieces*, *readings*, *materials*, *prose models*.

To adopt a definition other than this pragmatic one would mean making critical decisions that would override the pedagogical decisions of the Readers' editors, attempting to assess the literary merits and technical features of innumerable items treated in the textbooks as essays but of questionable status even in this protean genre. To substitute a critical canon for a pedagogical one would confound the purposes of this research. Are speeches essays? Not only the Gettysburg Address, but "We Will Fight No More Forever"—attributed to Chief Seattle (who allegedly didn't write it)? Are political manifestos essays? Not only the Declaration of Independence, but Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"—and is that document really a letter? May parts of book chapters be treated as essays—Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's "On the Fear of Death," Bruce Catton's "Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrasts" (both titles supplied by anthologists)? What about segments of autobiographies, such as variously titled portions of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* or Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*? Or segments of essays themselves, excerpted from longer prose works, as are many anthologized pieces by Twain and Thoreau? Are editorials, op-ed pieces, or straight news stories—such as Martin Gansberg's "38 Who Saw Murder and Didn't Call the Police"—essays? Are discipline-based academic articles (almost always excerpted) essays, among them Stanley Milgram's "The Perils of Obedience"? According to a strict (or even a loose) belletristic definition, none of these works would "count" as essays. However, were I to be such a strict constructionist, I'd be basing my study on my *personal canon*, not a sound basis for the comprehensive scope of this analysis. So, for the operative purposes of this study, whatever is in essay anthologies that isn't poetry or fiction is an *essay*—even material that in contexts other than Readers would have a different label. That's what textbook editors and teachers call this material, an unacknowledged convention.

Length, like other dimensions of size (height, weight), has a culturally determined sense of what is right. In an era of shrunken newspaper editorials and soundbite-sized newsmagazines, students seem to feel that an essay is long if it's over ten pages. Just as contemporary poetry anthologies favor lyrics over epics, most Readers favor material that is either short to start with or that can be custom-cut to fit the anthology's format. (Two anthologies, *A World of Ideas* and *Ways of Reading*, are atypical in using extremely long excerpts from even longer essays and chapters.) In practice, the possibility of excerpting means that any prose work of any length is (un)fair game. Although Woolf's *Room of One's Own* and Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* rank high in the canon, these long works are invariably excerpted. "Grant and Lee," a short section from *A Stillness at Appomattox* and a rare example of pure comparison and contrast, has attained canonical status, although editors seldom reprint anything else of Catton's.

Abridgments are a staple of all sorts of anthologies, not only in literature but in every academic discipline. Truncated readings appear to perturb neither students nor teachers (perhaps themselves educated via anthologies, given the pervasiveness

of “the Nortons” and “the Oxfords” in all realms of literature). Indeed Arthur Eastman, editor-in-chief of the first eight editions of the *Norton Reader*, held firm to the principle that no essay in the book should exceed five thousand words—and although thirty-one years later his successor as editor-in-chief, Linda Peterson, abandoned this practice with the ninth edition (personal communications with Eastman and Peterson), the practice of editorial surgery flourishes in Readers as it does in anthologies of other literary modes. Teachers who dislike abridgments can assign entire works. Students fed a diet of Works Lite through elementary and high school have learned to accept abridgments as the literary norm; it is whole works that are anomalous. It could be argued that when coverage—of a period, a canon, a field, even the long works of a single author—must be accomplished in a semester or a year, a hefty anthology does the job better and more cheaply than the alternatives. (But can blades of grass suffice for *Leaves of Grass*?)

A good case can be made for reprinting integrated, relatively self-contained, sections of book-length works—most commonly, excerpts from treatises on particular subjects such as Carl Sagan’s *Nuclear Winter*, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, and Deborah Tannen’s *You Just Don’t Understand*, and from autobiographies. For instance, Thoreau’s “Where I Lived and What I Lived For,” Frederick Douglass’s “Resurrection” (recounting his liberating fistfight with the oppressive overseer Covey), Mark Twain’s “Uncle John’s Farm,” Malcolm X’s “Hair/My First Conk,” Maya Angelou’s “Graduation,” and Richard Rodriguez’s “Aria” (can you guess which titles editors have supplied?) are typographically set off from the rest of the autobiographies in which they appear. Yet this practice leaves us with a bizarre textual synecdoche, in which a small part of a long text attains canonical status as a self-contained work.

2. RESEARCHING THE ESSAY CANON

Basis of Reader Selection. To find out what essays have constituted the teaching essay canon during the last half-century, my research assistant and I looked at Readers intended for use in composition courses of several kinds: basic writing, regular freshman composition, discipline-based, or writing-across-the-curriculum courses.

Time Span. In order to obtain complete runs of some of the most enduring Readers and to assess their changes over time, we needed to go back at least to the 1960s, when the first editions of Gerald Levin’s *Prose Models* (1964), Arthur Eastman’s *Norton Reader* (1965), William Smart’s *Eight Modern Essayists* (1965), Randall Decker’s *Patterns of Exposition* (1966), and Muscatine and Griffith’s *Borzoi College Reader* (1967) appeared. However, one book led to another, and another, and another, until we decided to study Readers published throughout the entire half-century, beginning with the end of World War II. This fifty-year span was a period of many major changes in higher education: the shift from prewar elitism to postwar democracy—in admissions and ultimately in curriculum; the opening up of community colleges, urban univer-

sities, and evening and weekend programs alongside traditional four-year schools; the expansion of a college education as a right for all—including women, minorities, immigrants, first-generation college students, and the underprepared. This time span also encompasses the major conceptual reorientation in teaching writing, from imitation of prose models to an emphasis on writing processes, reading, and critical thinking. These changes, we reasoned, would be reflected not only in the individual Readers but in major changes in the essay canon itself. To our surprise, we discovered that the canon itself has remained surprisingly stable over the past fifty years. Harris's observations on the "glacially changing core" of canons in general—that "authors once a part of the diachronic canon retain at least a minimal cachet; they may be relegated to a canonical attic but rarely to the trash can" ("Canonicity" 113)—hold true for essays as they do for other genres of literature.

Sample. I have chosen to identify the canonical essayists in Readers as those who survive in enough editions for their works to have been reprinted at least twenty times. This is an arbitrary decision on my part in an attempt to prevent the editors of a single book (say the *Norton Reader*, with the potential for reprinting an essay in all eighteen versions) from determining the presence of a canonical item, although perforce the influence of well-established books will be great. Twenty reprints is a figure that I expected would also allow for the emergence on the list of newer authors, reflecting current concerns such as issues of gender and multiculturalism. Conceivably new, wildly popular authors could make it onto the canonical list within a year or two—though only one author has done so in the 1990s. Fifty new or reissued titles per year, from 1970 to 1995, would have yielded a total of 1,250 Readers, containing 81,250 essays (averaging 65 per Reader)—a daunting number of books to locate. Fewer books were published in fewer editions between 1946 and 1970; a conservative estimate suggests 500 volumes, containing some 32,000 essays. Thus a fifty-year total would be about 1,750 Readers and 113,250 essays—an unwieldy body of material even if we could have found all the volumes, fugitive, forgotten, and forlorn. To complete this study before the end of this millennium, we needed a sample.

We reasoned that not all textbooks were equally influential and that the canon should be derived from the most influential textbooks, those published in multiple editions, presumably with sufficient course adoptions to warrant continuing publication, and continual revision to ensure adaptation to the market. Thus we decided to examine every edition of any Reader that had been published in four or more editions between 1946 and 1996. Because new editions are ordinarily published three or more years apart, a canonical Reader, according to this criterion, would have been published for a dozen or more years and would presumably have enough sales to warrant these successive incarnations. Relatively large textbook sales ranging upward from 2,000–3,000 a year (not counting the elusive used-book market) over the long term are a rough measure of a given Reader's influence. Because publishers will not reveal their sales figures, however, the number of editions must serve as an approximation.

In his *Memoir of the Norton Reader*, Gordon Sabine estimates that the industry leader sold an astronomical 1,500,000 copies in the first eight editions—sales approximating 43,000 copies annually (100).

This selection of Readers resulted in an 18.6 percent sample of the total number of volumes (1,750) published between 1946 and 1996. These canonical Readers, 58 titles in 325 volumes, contain approximately 21,000 reprintings of some 8,000 different essay titles by 4,246 authors (“title” is not necessarily synonymous with an individual essay, because editors often retitle the works they reprint). These authors and titles have been compiled in a database from which we have derived the essay canon. Our collection of Readers is ultimately destined for the National Archives of Composition and Rhetoric, currently being established at the University of New Hampshire–Durham in conjunction with the University of Rhode Island.

Database. Appendix 1 identifies all the Readers in this study, arranged alphabetically by title. For simplicity’s sake I will refer to the first edition title, despite subsequent minor alterations of titles, a few changes of editors, and (because of acquisitions and mergers) far more changes of publishers. If a book is quoted from, it is cited, editor’s name first, in the Works Cited list.

The Readers’ contents are compiled in a database that can be sorted by author (Edward Abbey to Harold Zyskind), essay title, anthology title, anthology editor, or publication date. Analysis of these categories suggests some of the factors, implicit and explicit, that have influenced the anthologists’ choice and treatment of selections. According to what principles do they decide what to include and what to delete from successive editions? How do they advise students to read and write essays, in general and in particular? What apparatus do editors provide—rhetorical advice, organizational schema, headnotes, suggestions for reading and writing? What’s in the instructors’ guide? (The span of this study ends just as various electronic adaptations of Readers appear on the horizon; they are not considered here.) Space does not permit the publication here of either the entire database, which compresses into a 64-page alphabetical listing all the 4,246 authors whose works are reprinted in the canonical textbooks, or even of the complete list of 174 canonical authors. Appendix 2 is an abbreviated list of those authors whose essays have attained the canonical status of 50 or more reprints, with the short title of their most widely reprinted essay(s).

The entire canonical list (to be published in the book-length version of *The Essay Canon*) consists of Supernovas (the 18 authors whose works were reprinted 100 or more times), Stars (15 authors whose works were reprinted 70–99 times), and Luminaries (141 authors whose works were reprinted 20–69 times). Of this total, the 18 Supernovas’ 488 titles totaled 3,004 reprints; the 15 Stars wrote 252 titles that totaled 1,226 reprints; and the Luminaries contributed 1,306 titles, totaling 4,611 reprints. Thus although the 174 canonical authors comprise only 4 percent of the 4,246 authors included in these Readers, the 8,841 reprints of their essays constitute 42.1 per-

cent of the total canon—close enough to 50 percent to warrant their stellar status. This article will discuss the preliminary research findings derived from an analysis of the complete list of canonical authors with twenty or more reprints.

3. HOW ESSAYS BECOME CANONICAL

Today essays live in freshman composition courses, which are devoted to the reading and writing of this genre. Essayists themselves are lonely travelers in an indifferent universe of literature, lurking on the edges of the mainstream territories mapped out and claimed by writers of fiction, poetry, and drama. Their works are less likely to appear in whole books than in out-of-the-way locales—big and little magazines (the *New Yorker*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Sewanee Review*), organizational publications (such as *Sierra* and the *New England Journal of Medicine*), the odd commercial catalog (Land's End, Banana Republic), newspaper op-ed and feature sections. Yet we seldom think of the authors primarily as *essayists* or even as writers of articles, but as philosophers, politicians, historians, scientists, physicians, clergy, or practitioners of other arts, crafts, and skills.

The common reader's biggest problem is not what to read, for essays abound, but where to find these works in bookstores or in libraries. Princeton's on-line catalog, for instance, contains 30,000 entries for *essay* between 1980 and 1988. Alexander Butrym notes the perforce vague, eclectic, and consequently unhelpful subject heading *essay* in the *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, which jumbles together "learned treatises of all sorts with the works of classical essay writers such as Montaigne, Lamb, and Bacon," but omits the works of contemporary belletristic essayists such as Richard Selzer, Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, Alice Walker, Tillie Olsen, Gretel Ehrlich, and Lewis Thomas, who are catalogued under a variety of genre and key word subject headings (1–2). At the other extreme, bookstores disperse belletristic essays according to key word categories—biography, travel, nature, politics, and more. Another form of obscurity is the absence of the term *essay* from Stephen North's index to *The Making of Knowledge in Composition Studies*, even though the writing of essays (which he usually calls "texts") is the subject of much of the research North surveys.

As a consequence of these kinds of fragmentation, the essay as a genre has had a furtive, if not fugitive, status in twentieth-century American belletristic writing. There are very few single-authored collections of essays relative to the numbers of novels published in the same time period; many types of nonfiction are known by subject (Civil War history, philosophy of ethics) rather than by form. At this turn of the millennium, despite the distinctive literary presence of essayistic critics such as Joseph Epstein and Susan Sontag, Americans have no tradition of buying and reading collections of what they regard as *essays* as they might have done in the nineteenth century with the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson or Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Holmes could style himself “the autocrat of the breakfast table”; no essayist today claims such authority.

Nevertheless, essays, broadly conceived, are the lingua franca of the American academy. Even if students call their assigned reading “stories” and their assigned writing “papers,” it is “essays” that they read in any of the two hundred composition anthologies on the market in any given year, which collectively publish about 13,000 essays, and “essays” that they write. Except for Atwan’s *Best American Essays* annual, currently in its thirteenth year, and an upstart rival, Phillip Lopate’s *Anchor Essay Annual*, there is no predictable, widely accessible gathering place for essays in twentieth-century America other than these textbook anthologies.

To arrive in the canon, an essay must travel a long and arduous journey, the survival of the teachable. It must first be discovered. The editors of canonical textbooks are, as a group, omnivorous yet discriminating readers, eager for new authors, new subjects, and new treatments of familiar topics. But they can’t read every nonfiction piece published in English (*Writer’s Market* annually lists some 4,000 publications, not including 90,000 professional journals). So they (and significant others—colleagues, spouses, graduate assistants—they have enlisted in their quest) read around in highbrow and sometimes middlebrow periodicals. They read creative nonfiction: autobiographies by such writers as Lucy Grealy, Shirley Lim, Gerald Early; collections of essays either by individual authors, such as Stanley Elkin (*Pieces of Soap*) and Scott Russell Sanders (*Staying Put*), or on particular topics—travel, sports, science, relationships—such as Patricia Foster’s *Sister to Sister* and Steven Harvey’s *In a Dark Wood: Personal Essays by Men on Middle Age*.

They also read each other’s books. An appealing and teachable work that surfaces in one anthology is likely to appear in five to ten canonical collections—and innumerable others—within the next five years. For instance, Brent Staples, whose work was anthologized eight times between 1983 and 1989, has risen to canonical status in the 1990s with forty-one reprints between 1990 and 1996. His essay, “Black Men and Public Space,” was originally published in *Harper’s* in December, 1986. It was picked up by one Reader in 1987; in 1988 it appeared in three others, including significantly both the longer and shorter *Norton Readers*—and from then on it spread, until by 1996 it had been reprinted twenty-three times in canonical anthologies ranging from *Life Studies* to *Reading Critically, Writing Well*.

There’s no ready way to tell whether an anthologist has obtained a particular essay from its original source or from another anthology unless an early editor prints only excerpts and successive reprintings consist of the same excerpts (or, as one astute editor told me, when that editor’s silent corrections of errors in the original are picked up by later editors). It seems unlikely that all the editors who have anthologized works such as “A Modest Proposal” (151 reprints), “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (first published in *Why We Can’t Wait*, 1963; 50 reprints), or Alexander Petrunkevitch’s “The Spider and the Wasp” (first published as part of an article in *Scientific*

American in August 1952; 48 reprints) would have gone to the original sources to find them. It should be noted that such imitation, indeed the sincerest form of flattery, is not unique to essay anthologists. As critics of poetry anthologies are wont to lament (see Rasula; Golding), it can scarcely be coincidental that the same poem or combination of poems by a particular poet is selected for inclusion in anthology after anthology.

A particularly good source of belletristic essays, elegant and efficient, is Atwan's *Best American Essays*, invaluable not only for the two dozen essays its guest editor chooses, but also for its appended list of 150 other "Notable Essays." These comprise the remainder of Atwan's original list, winnowed from hundreds of submissions, published in the predictable big and little magazines and in such out-of-the-way locations as *Adolescent Psychiatry*, *Banana Republic Trips*, *Family Therapy Networker*, and *New York Law Journal*. Virtually all are by experienced essayists, as Jamaica Kincaid's selections for the 1995 volume illustrate, although some are better known as poets (Maxine Kumin, Charles Simic), as fiction writers (Edna O'Brien, Grace Paley, John Edgar Wideman, Tobias Wolff), or as academic critics (William H. Gass, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.). The entire list of works identified in the successive volumes of *Best American Essays* might constitute an aesthetic canon, if one existed, for, as Atwan says, they are "admirably written," "works of high literary quality intended as fully developed, independent essays on subjects of general interest," demonstrating an "awareness of craft as well as a forcefulness of thought" (Preface xv). Or it might be called, simply, Atwan's canon, though he told me in an email message that he is wrestling with a "strong definition" of *essay* that encompasses the common elements of the "two major branches" of essays that he selects—"one that's more literary (the personal, familiar, reflective, or informal essay) and the other less literary (articles, criticism, journalism)." Atwan, in effect, does the preliminary searching and screening for all the anthologists who subsequently examine his list—much as, say, a major newspaper's book review editor funnels to reviewers 1 or 2 percent of the published books received.

Why do some essays remain in the canon? My understanding of the survival factors that result in the teaching canon is based not only on my current research, but also on my long experience as editor of three Readers (one canonical, two not). It is also derived from interviews—engaging and candid—with the editors and publishers of a number of the most widely used canonical anthologies currently on the market. Indeed, the 119 editors of contemporary freshman essay anthologies—many college English teachers, a few professional editors (Jane Aaron, Robert Atwan) and writers (including canonical essayists Donald Hall and X. J. Kennedy)—have become the compilers of the American canon of twentieth-century essays.

For an essay to remain in subsequent editions of a Reader, it must survive repeated scrutiny from the anthologist and the ever-changing in-house editors. Every edition of a canonical Reader is also vetted by multiple reviewers—among them,

classroom teachers who adopt the book and other teachers whose responses are either volunteered or solicited by the publisher. Although such editorial Darwinism does not automatically ensure the survival of a canon of distinguished essays, it does favor the pedagogically sturdy.

Another survival factor lies in getting there first; editors of the anthologies that began the earliest and have the longest life-spans also exercise the greatest influence over canonicity. Four of the five most influential are Readers with a liberal arts orientation; *Patterns of Exposition* alone among these emphasizes modes of discourse. The leader is the *Norton Reader*, where 25 of the 174 canonical authors first appeared. The ubiquity of the *Norton Reader* and the propensity of other editors to copy its selections make it the industry point of reference. Next is *Readings for a Liberal Education* (“Locke, Gibson, and Arms”), published in five editions 1948–67, and contributor of 21 authors to the canon. *A Collection of Readings for Writers* (Shaw, Bryan, and Wykoff), published in six editions 1946–67, introduced 14 canonical authors, and the *Borzoi College Reader*, published in seven editions 1967–92, added 10, as did Decker’s *Patterns of Exposition* (1966–95). Essayists, like other authors who attain canonical status, tend to remain ensconced, as Willie van Peer demonstrates in “Two Laws of Literary History,” so over time the canon expands. Only Jacques Barzun (1948–83), Bergen Evans (1948–82), Maynard Hutchings (1948–88), Lewis Mumford (1948–82), George Bernard Shaw (1957–87), and X. J. Kennedy (1965–89) disappeared from the list before 1990.

Professional writers contribute 58 percent of the canonical pieces: journalists (29), belletristic essayists (27), novelists (25), satirists and humorists (10), and poets (9). Most of the other authors are distinguished scholars or other professionals whose writing is clear and accessible to a general readership: critics (12), educators (9), scientists (9), theologians (8), politicians (8), psychologists or psychoanalysts (8), linguists (7), historians (5), and others (8). Nevertheless, an essay is not necessarily canonical because its writing is distinguished, intellectually brilliant, or the work of a distinguished figure. Nor is an essay necessarily canonical because it is critically esteemed; as we’ve already established, critics generally ignore essays. This doesn’t mean that essays *can’t* be distinguished, brilliant, or excellent models—just that such criteria are not essential for an essay to arrive in the canon or to stay there.

Once an essay has been discovered, to attain canonicity it must be not only liked, but sufficiently well liked to have been reprinted, according to my criteria, twenty or more times over a fifty-year period. This is not an exorbitant standard of affection. Most publishers have a broad spectrum of Readers: the equivalent of a stripped-down economy vehicle; a general purpose model; a minivan; a truck; a sportscar; and an elegant, fine-tuned top-of-the-line model. The sponsoring editor usually determines the type of Reader to meet the competition. For example, will it be brief or bulky? Will it be arranged according to modes of discourse, contemporary issues, or a particular theme—such as ecology or multiculturalism? The Reader’s niche profoundly

influences the anthologist's choice of essays. In theory, the more features that make an essay appealing to an anthologist, the greater its chances for canonicity. In actuality, the importance of any given feature in a particular textbook depends on the anthologist's taste, judgment, and experience and on the textbook publisher's in-house editorial influence, supplemented by external reviews of the manuscript-in-progress.

To become a candidate for canonicity, an essay first must satisfy the anthologist's criteria for teachability; then it must balance intellectually, politically, and rhetorically with the rest of the book; it must contribute aesthetically; and its permission-to-reprint must be affordable. The consistent exception to the following analysis is *Ways of Reading*, with its deliberate focus on "long and complicated texts" (Bartholomae and Petrosky v), many highly theoretical, and on innovative ways of reading them.

1. *Criteria of teachability.* Whether and how an essay will (or is imagined to) work in the classroom is the overriding concern for including it in a Reader of any type, and for re-assessing its reprinting in subsequent editions.

a. *Level of difficulty.* How much do teachers have to know or learn in order to teach this work (a particular concern for administrators of courses with multiple sections, new TAs, or teachers assigned to sections on short notice)? Will students understand its concepts and vocabulary, with or without a lot of explanation in class? Is it intellectually appropriate for them? Is it too technical, too allusive, too arty for students to stick with it?

b. *Suitability for the level and type of course the anthology is targeting.* Is the essay amenable to a particular teaching philosophy or method? Does it suit the orientation to reading and learning that the anthology is intended to promote?

c. *Length.* Is the essay short enough (say, under 5,000 words) to be discussed in one or two class periods? If not, can it be excerpted—and with how much violence to the text? Well-written short works of any genre—think of lyric poetry—are tightly and conspicuously structured. To leave out the opening paragraphs forces a later segment to serve as a beginning, despite argumentative or rhetorical devices that signal "middle." Nor can a midsection double rhetorically as a conclusion; the author didn't set it up to end the piece, and it will invariably sound sawed-off, as if the author had stopped in mid-. Moreover, omissions throw off the proportioning of the entire work; excerpting violates the balance between beginning, middle, and end.

2. *Balance with the rest of the book.*

a. *Intellectual and political resonance.* In what ways does the essay's topic, point of view, moral or ethical stance contribute to the kinds of dialogue or debate the Reader hopes to engender? Will this essay, either by itself or in conjunction with other essays, abet students' critical thinking and their understanding of the world, or of a particular issue? Does the essay represent views

and values that anthologists believe students should consider, confront—and either challenge or adopt? But—moderation in all things—does the piece nevertheless avoid offending readers?

b. *Author's reputation and personal characteristics.* What characteristics of the author contribute to the book's balanced perspective? (Literary reputation in the '50s and '60s has been to an extent supplanted in the '80s and '90s by gender and ethnicity.) Does the essayist's life, if perceived to be relevant, as is Martin Luther King's combination of Christianity and civil rights activism, reinforce the essay's point?

To attain canonicity the work must be written by an author of reputation, either as a professional writer, or as a scholar or notable practitioner in the field the writing addresses. The sole exception in the current canon is "I Want a Wife" by the otherwise unknown Judy [Syfers] Brady. (Non-canonical works anthologized only once or twice in fifty years are of much more diverse, often unknown ancestry. Which authors do you recognize among the six noncanonical Allens—Charlotte, Frederick Lewis, Gina, Jennifer, John L., William?)

3. *Aesthetic qualities.* While no anthologist would admit aesthetic indifference, anthologists who are explicitly concerned with the essay as exemplifying modes of discourse (X. J. and Dorothy Kennedy's *Bedford Reader*, Joseph Trimmer and Maxine Hairston's *Riverside Reader*) or as a belletristic genre (Sheridan Baker's *The Essayist*, William Smart's *Eight Modern Essayists*) are especially concerned with aesthetics. Readers that contain a high proportion of autobiographical writing, as do multicultural Readers (all are too new to have attained canonical status), are also well written, as a rule.

a. *Form.* Is the essay a good rhetorical model—for example, of argument or comparison and contrast? Does it provide appropriate ballast for other selections in the book? An essay usually exemplifies a multitude of rhetorical techniques; a definition, of *love* or *truth*, for instance, might contain illustrations, examples, comparison and contrast, description, even narrative replete with characters and dialogue. Thus a particular piece might work equally well in a rhetorically oriented Reader if categorized under any of these terms; or in a belletristic Reader classified, say, as both satire and autobiography. The more versatile a work is perceived to be, the more places it will turn up.

b. *Technique.* Is the essay technically interesting, sufficiently well written to serve as a good model for organization, style, vocabulary, tone, even wit? Does the author "make it new," enabling readers to see the subject afresh?

Contemporary canonical essays, on the whole, have to sound contemporary—in language, syntax, relative briskness and brevity. Whether the subject, style, or other features (such as length) account for the disappearance of the canonical nineteenth-

century essayists (Lamb, De Quincey, Ruskin, Carlyle, Mill, Arnold, Pater) from the twentieth-century canon—Newman is the sole exception—is difficult to determine, though their absence is conspicuous.

As they fulfill multiple criteria that ensure their pedagogical longevity, extremely popular canonical essays also satisfy a felt sense that they are not only canonical but inevitable. These include such works as Swift's "Modest Proposal" (151 reprints); Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" (118 reprints) and "Shooting an Elephant" (113 reprints); the Declaration of Independence (96 reprints); White's "Once More to the Lake" (88 reprints); King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (50 reprints) and "I Have a Dream" (68 reprints); and Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" (48 reprints). It should be remembered that these numbers are based on a sample of 18.6 percent of the total number of volumes published in the past fifty years. To get a realistic estimate of the actual pervasiveness of the canonical writers' work, multiply the numbers roughly by five. According to this calculation, I estimate that "A Modest Proposal" has been anthologized some 755 times during this fifty-year span, "Shooting an Elephant" 565 times, and so on. Thus our sense of the essay canon is dominated by three belletristic essays (four if you include the satire "A Modest Proposal"), a political manifesto, a philosophical treatise, a speech, and a sermon-like letter that combines qualities of all of these other forms of writing—a blurred genre indeed. All of these works offer political commentary, even—some would argue—"Once More to the Lake" in its quietism. Nevertheless, like the other essays that endure, all of these pieces have a humanistic relevance for discussion and writing that can transcend their own contexts of time and culture. For comparable reasons, essays that narrate the experiences of a particular life in ways that can be generalized, such as Angelou's "Graduation" (44 reprints), Thurber's "University Days" (35 reprints), and Rodriguez's "Aria" (23 reprints), stand a better chance of becoming canonical than do essays laden with information that quickly becomes dated, like most newspaper editorials and sociological treatises.

4. *Cost.* An essay must be affordable. Supply and demand govern permissions prices for anthology selections, as for any other commodity. *Norton Reader* permissions rose an inflated 24-fold, from \$4,200 in 1965 to over \$100,000 in 1992 (Sabine 66). Some well-established authors, and others in the ascendancy, charge \$700–\$1,000 per essay, a few charge by the word, and the cost continues to rise. Since pricey canonical authors, such as Orwell and Walker, continue to be anthologized as briskly as ever, the costs of their work must be balanced by writings in the public domain—"The Allegory of the Cave," "A Modest Proposal," the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address.

Assuming even a modest \$20,000 in contemporary permissions costs, half borne by the publisher, half by the anthology's editor, a Reader earning a 10 percent royalty would have to sell 5,000 copies at \$20 a copy before it would even begin to compensate for the editor's effort. That a scant 10 percent of all Readers published go into

second or subsequent editions implies that most don't recoup the initial investment. Thus permissions costs provide the most significant counter-canonical pressure on anthologists to dilute the cost of copyrighted canonical essays by including works in the public domain, reprints from scholarly journals with modest permissions fees, and essays by emerging, relatively unknown authors.

In any given year, some two hundred essay anthologies are marketed for freshman composition, including some fifty new titles, half brand new, half new editions, as the *WPA* Annual Bibliography reveals. Assuming that the anthologies published in a given year average 65 selections, of the 13,000 annual essay slots (200 × 65), around 3,250 (50 new Reader titles × 65) have the opportunity to be filled anew every year (Martin; Smitten; Webb). However, the database shows that except for student writings most of these essays will not be new. Even if 25 percent of these were new in a given year, the actual number of new arrivals into the canon will be much smaller, about 4 percent. Thus only 32 of the 812 essays newly anthologized in 1990–96 have a shot at canonicity. (Although this number seems small, it is on par with the odds for all literary genres, as van Peer [121–27] and Golding [chapter 1] demonstrate.) The other 780 newcomers will remain on the periphery, included in the first edition, perhaps in the second, out thereafter.

A case in point: of all the authors new to these books in the 1990s, only Deborah Tannen has attained canonical status during the decade in which her work was originally published. Her example perhaps characterizes the sensibility of current anthologists. She is a woman linguist of international distinction; her writing is lucid, informed, politically sensitive, and on a topic of perennial interest: male-female relations. Moreover, her books intended for a general readership, such as *You Don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*, from which most of the 26 excerpts reprinted in 19 anthologies between 1992 and 1996 are taken, are divided into brief sections with catchy titles. The 21-page chapter 3, for instance, “‘Put Down That Paper and Talk to Me!’: Rapport-talk and Report-talk” has thirteen sections ranging from two to eight paragraphs. Although the book as a whole is well integrated, many of these short sections appear to be self-contained, and can thus be excised as single, free-standing units that require little or no editorial intervention. Clearly a book born to be anthologized!

I predict that the ten to fifteen additions to the canon by the end of the decade will come from a pool of writings in various disciplines that share the features of Tannen's work. Or else they will be self-contained essays or op-ed pieces by belletristic writers and journalists, particularly women, minority, and ethnic authors of diverse class backgrounds, political allegiances, sexual orientations, and disabilities. Thus tomorrow's canonical authors, arriving in today's anthologies—you're reading it here first—will include such shoo-ins as these: Gloria Anzaldúa, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Lucy Grealy, Jamaica Kincaid, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Gary Soto, Amy Tan, Patricia A. Williams, Terry Tempest Williams. Shelby Steele's essay, “On Being Black and Middle Class,” a well-written argument from a controversial (but not *too*

controversial) perspective, is almost irresistible. First published in *Commentary* in 1988, reprinted by Atwan in 1989, then widely anthologized between 1991 and 1995, it seems headed for the charts. Because it is not of comparable literary quality, Sucheng Chan's 1989 "And You're Short, Besides!", on overcoming discrimination as a self-described "physically handicapped Asian American woman," is less likely to endure. I would, however, lay even money on such exciting writers as Hilton Als, Chang-rae Lee, Arundhati Roy, Luc Sante, and Lê Thi Diem Thüy—and I am not a gambling woman.

4. THE ESSAY CANON AND IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

Why is the freshman textbook enterprise, with its opportunity to transform dramatically the ways students participate in the world as readers and writers, so essentially conservative? The perseverance of the canonical essayists in the canonical textbooks confirms Thomas Kuhn's observations on the normative state of scientific textbooks as conservators of received knowledge rather than as innovators. Each sales representative is promoting books that compete not only against the comparable works of other publishers, but against other works in the publisher's own line—a practice intensified by mergers that combine, for instance, Little Brown HarperCollins Addison Wesley Longman, and the textbook lines of each. This competition, as well as editors' human inertia, exerts conservative pressures.

The winnowing never stops, but it does conserve. New editions of a book appear every three or four years, not because the contents or the pedagogy are outdated, but because the extensive recycling of used books and publishers' sample copies extinguishes the bulk of new book sales at this point. To justify the publication of a subsequent edition, 25–35 percent of the selections in the previous edition must be replaced, but not necessarily with new works; material from earlier editions may be reinstated, and readings may be imported from the anthologies of others. Publishers solicit reviews of tables of contents from instructors who have used or might use the book, and from a few who have rejected it, but seldom from actual student readers. Essays that are taught and will be taught again remain. The rest are discarded, regardless of merit, unless the anthologist can convince an in-house editor to retain a favorite ugly duckling. Because most reviewers indicate that they don't use most new authors and published student essays in class, there is pressure to replace the rejected fare with tantalizing new morsels—authors and topics *du jour* to tempt the prospective adopter. Thus the chances are high that an earlier edition's familiar material will be retained, and that its new material will be replaced by even newer material that fits into the slots vacated by its temporary predecessors (see my "Making Essay Connections"). These practices have an inescapably conservative bias in favor of familiar canonical works.

Teachability is, however, not replicability; if these books enabled students to re-create canonical essays they'd create a new generation of potentially canonical essayists—but then, students who read *Moby-Dick* and “The Waste Land” don't write works like these either. Anthologized essays that depend on the sophisticated writer's depth or breadth of understanding of an issue (“Letter from Birmingham Jail”) or disciplinary field (anything by, say, Lewis Thomas, Stephen Jay Gould, Bertrand Russell, William James, Karl Jung, or Sigmund Freud) are intended not for replication but for the intellectual stimulation of student writers. It usually takes more years than student writers have experienced to attain the technical finesse and stylistic and emotional daring that characterize the work of belletristic essayists—though their subjects, organizational patterns, tone, and perspective are nevertheless expected to provide students with models of thinking and writing.

All anthologies (not just Readers) deracinate their material—old or new—from its original context and replant it in the anthologist's soil. There the anthologist usually cuts, espaliers, grafts, and otherwise trims the added work to fit in with the rest of the selections, on which s/he has performed comparable operations. These normative activities of the anthology editor make what Golding says of the teaching canon in poetry equally applicable to the essay canon:

The teacher-editor needs to accommodate extracanonical work if he or she is to represent the current state of poetry with any accuracy. When a textbook anthology such as *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* canonizes poetic outsiders, however, it renders their work culturally and intellectually harmless. What one might call this detoxification of potent work has its sources in the interpretive community's survival instinct, and the fact that if a pluralist literature is to be taught, it must be systematized. (36)

Thus any essay in a Reader is recontextualized by being juxtaposed with other essays of the anthologist's choosing, in the anthologist's arrangement, according to the anthologist's logic, aesthetic, and pedagogy. Susanne Langer's “Signs and Symbols” (originally published in *Fortune*, January 1944), Judy [Syfers] Brady's “I Want a Wife” (*Ms.*, December 1971 inaugural issue), Nancy Mairs's “On Being a Cripple” (*Plaintext: Deciphering a Woman's Life*, a 1984 doctoral dissertation before being published in 1986), and Charles Darwin's “Understanding Natural Selection” (a small portion of *On the Origin of Species*, 1859) each had a particular range of meaning and resonance in its original context. All acquire new, potentially very different coloration when transplanted, especially if they illustrate rhetorical modes in belletristic anthologies, which always emphasize form and subordinate history and culture.

Moreover, most anthologists reinforce their new contexts by providing an extensive rhetorical matrix for each essay—including discussions of how to write, biographical headnotes, and suggestions for reading and writing. Reader editors seem uniformly to assume that student writers can use the textbook's rhetorical or thematic concepts to write about—or in the manner of—even the most abstruse and complex works in the anthology. Hence the common writing assignment to imitate

“Once More to the Lake” or “A Modest Proposal.” These assignments are usually exercises in civil obedience, but sometimes a sophisticated assignment “takes,” as in University of Connecticut student Nicole Estvanik’s Aetna prizewinning essay, “Babysitter: A Study in Power Relations,” a Foucauldian analysis of sitter, parents, and children, stimulated by an assignment in *Ways of Reading*.

Given that many individual readings are engaging, even exciting, and as a rule well written, why do so many of these anthologies seem so dull? Would more exciting books incite students to the civil disobedience that many of the anthologized essays discuss and even encourage? How much more excitement, indeed incitement, do students need for social activism than the inspiring, confrontational words of the anthologists’ darlings—Frederick Douglass, Henry Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, Alice Walker, Martin Luther King, Jr.? Yet many American college students read essays in Readers as they learn to read everything in school, through the clouded lens of having been there, been doing that for a dozen grades before they get to freshman English. Thus the textbook context modulates what in other settings emerged as a high-minded zeal for death and transfiguration, blunting the knife edge of the individual essays into a conservatism their authors never knew.

However—and this is an important caveat—for students not jaded by their journey through American primary and secondary schools, essays such as these have the potential to retain their original incendiary power. One of my doctoral students, Ning Yu, born in Beijing in 1955, had been denied an education during the Maoist regime. His father, a professor of Chinese literature, was imprisoned, his family was sent far from home, and Ning was forced to work as a bricklayer. When the political winds shifted and Ning was finally allowed to attend Beijing University, he took an English course taught by an American (and therefore by definition subversive) who smuggled in copies of the Declaration of Independence, “Civil Disobedience,” “I Have a Dream,” and other American freedom documents. Through the purple smudge of tattered dittos, Ning read these incendiary words in much the same spirit as their original audience did and found in the American dream his dream. He vowed to study these authors in their native context, came to America, and wrote his doctoral dissertation on Thoreau; his American citizenship is pending.

Ning’s exceptional Reader response notwithstanding, a problem even bigger than the recontextualization of a Reader’s essays lies in the reductive ways in which editors’ study questions encourage students to read them. For the most part, these questions have throughout the fifty-year period of this study embedded a philosophy of reading and writing that encourages students to be passive, obedient, and reverent; they read to unlock the meaning of the text, and write to understand and appreciate its meaning or replicate its matter, mode, or manner (see Scholes, chapter 1; Jamieson 159–61). Editors create a distinguished canon but undermine it by surrounding its constituents with interpretive apparatus. It’s not the essays’ fault if the apparatus clings to them as lint to velcro, marking them as textbook fodder

rather than as freestanding citizens of the once proud literary genre to which in other times, other contexts they belonged.

It's hard to talk about study questions, let alone write them, without succumbing to parody, as Frederick Crews reveals in *The Pooh Perplex: A Freshman Casebook*—a collection of a dozen hilarious essays on *Winnie-the-Pooh* from the critical perspectives of a Marxist, a Freudian, and others whose names betray their profession. The “Questions and Study Projects” for “A Bourgeois Writer’s Proletarian Fables” are:

1. In our Freshman English courses we try to show that everyone, within certain very broad limits, is entitled to his opinion on any subject. Do you feel that Tempralis [the alleged author] was entitled to his 1939 opinions about Pooh? Why not?
2. Tempralis seems obsessed with “fascism,” doesn’t he? Look up this difficult word in your dictionary and explain its meaning to the class. (26)

That these parodies sound remarkably like the real thing is not surprising, given that the trend-setting Readers of the quarter-century after World War II reflected the liberal arts, New Critical orientation pervasive in the teaching of both composition and literature during this time (see Sabine 25–31). That these study questions are today seen to undermine the very qualities that led certain essays to be canonized in the first place reflects a changed sensibility in today’s pedagogy of reading and thinking (see Slevin; Faigley; Jamieson). The fault, if fault there be, lies not in the canonical selections themselves, but in the passive relation between reader and text that these questions—and, let’s face it, many classroom teachers—continue to encourage. We have met the teachers of what Scholes ironically calls “the proper consumption of literature . . . ‘interpretation’” (5), and they continue to be us.

The *Norton Reader*’s apparatus illustrates what appears in literally hundreds of other Readers. All nine editions include similar study questions for E. B. White’s highly metaphorical “Democracy,” two brief paragraphs originally published anonymously in the *New Yorker* “Talk of the Town” on July 3, 1943. Democracy, says White, is “the line that forms on the right. It is the don’t in don’t shove. It is the hole in the stuffed shirt through which the sawdust slowly trickles; it is the dent in the high hat. Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time. It is the feeling of privacy in the voting booths, the feeling of community in the libraries, the feeling of vitality everywhere” (rpt. in Eastman et al. 767). Here’s how the editors’ “Questions for Study, Discussion, and Writing” encourage students—and their teachers—to approach this text. They are brief enough to quote in full:

1. White’s piece is dated July 3, 1943, the middle of World War II. How did the occasion shape what White says about democracy?
2. Look up “democracy” in a standard desk dictionary. Of the several meanings given, which one best applies to Becker’s definition [in another essay]? Does more than one apply to White’s?

3. How does Becker's language differ from White's? What does the difference suggest about the purposes and audiences of the two men?
4. Translate White's definition into non-metaphorical language. (For example, "It is the line that forms on the right" might be translated by "It has no special privileges.") Determine what is lost in the translation, or, in other words, what White has gained by using figurative language. (768)

From interviews I conducted with Arthur Eastman in 1995 and 1996, as well as from my experiences of auditing his Shakespeare course and taking his graduate course in expository writing at Michigan in the 1950s, I know him to be a superb teacher. He was concerned with careful and precise reading, not only the letter of the text, but the spirit—of the author, of the age, of the nature of the work, its music, its silence. Long before "process" became the mantra of writing teachers nationwide, for Dr. Eastman we wrote and rewrote and rewrote until we got it right: sense, sensibility. As general editor of the first eight editions of the *Norton Reader*, he was, I believe, responsible for writing most of the book's apparatus. Thus these study questions reflect his liberal arts orientation, his love of essays as a genre (Sabine 31), his orientation to reading and writing, and also the New Critical orientation of the early postwar years, when he came of age as a teacher.

Today's Marxist and postmodern critics such as John Trimbur, Paul Lauter (*Canons*, chapters 3 and 4), Lester Faigley, and James Slevin would ask, "What version of whose world?" White's essay represents. The *Norton* apparatus for "Democracy," says Slevin, implies that reading is "passive and obedient: the reader's role is simply to understand—by acts of consulting (a dictionary, [#2]), translating (updating examples [#4]), and comparing (with the definition of another writer [#3])." Student writers too are conceived of as "ahistorical and passive"; the questions invite "stereotyped notions of the Fourth of July and World War II" and require "no serious research or historical inquiry." The students, "appreciative and uncritical," are invited to "consider what White gains by metaphor but not what he might lose or conceal." Moreover, "the text's relevance to other writers is also, in the sense used here, only occasional: White's essay is to be used as a model for composing a similar text on a different abstraction. Writing is thus seen as a form of uncritical imitation." Reading, according to this apparatus, concludes Slevin, "means understanding the point and appreciating the technique. Writing involves reproducing the qualities that get exhibited in White's style." Thereby reading and writing become "acts of attentive acquiescence" (55).

There are, of course, other ways to read White's (or any) text, as Slevin points out, in a complicated analysis that addresses the upper-class, "corporate personality" of White's persona, his easy assumptions that upper-class privileges are everyone's privileges, his complacent vision of America as "owning" democracy, and his idealized construction of a "purified version of the American polity" that "suspends his critical judgment and implicitly encourages his readers to suspend theirs." Slevin favors instead critical literacy "that is historical and contextual," removing readings of

texts from the formalist literary theory that pervades the *Norton Reader* into the realm of “poststructuralist cultural theory’s historicizing and problematizing of texts and textual studies” (65–71). Faigley’s postmodern analysis of “The Conflicting Rhetoric of Writing Textbooks” reaffirms Slevin’s perspective (132–62), although neither Faigley nor Slevin offers alternative study questions that would encourage, for instance, discussions “of whose interests are at stake in a particular conflict,” or “how the language writers use is related to those interests” (Faigley 161–62). Whether the adoption of alternative “powerful conceptual models” in composition textbooks across the board would elevate the essay from the *déclassé* status to which twentieth-century formalist criticism has consigned it remains to be seen. But, as we approach the new millennium, rescue is at hand from other sources.

5. THE FUTURE OF THE ESSAY CANON

The future of the essay canon is, of course, inextricably intertwined with the future of the essay. If essays were a dying genre, written by dead people in a dead language, their lowly status during much of the twentieth century would lead us to predict their death in the twenty-first. Happily, as we near the millennium there is new and abundant life in this revitalized genre.

For the essay in contemporary America “has joined the modern world,” as Annie Dillard says (xx). No longer need essays be treated as “synonymous with literary criticism,” written *about* literature rather than being literature themselves (see Scholes, chapter 1). No longer need essays be considered anemic, genteel, old-fashioned, written by failed novelists or trivializers of the ephemeral. Essays are now being written, as Atwan explains, “in the same imaginative spirit as fiction and poetry,” and with comparable artistry, by writers daring and determined to write with elegant toughness about tough subjects, determined to resist “the plodding memoir, the facile discovery of identity, the predictable opinion, the unearned assertion” (Introduction 6, 9). Dillard and Atwan are partisans of essays, however, and we will know the essay has truly come of age when writers—essayists and critics alike—can discuss it without defining it; we should know it when we see it. What we will come to recognize as the essay canon in the new millennium is today in flux, as canons always are, however glacial their rate of change.

The essay canon as you have seen it here is in the process of transformation from an inadvertent to a deliberate canon, as our literary nation undergoes a process of “essay warming” (see, for instance, DuPlessis). The Creative Nonfiction categories of MFA programs thriving around the country are a sign that essays matter. Writers identify themselves as “essayists,” their work is awarded prizes in “creative nonfiction” categories of contests, and (since 1993) is published in *Creative Nonfiction*. Essays continue to appear, as they have throughout the twentieth century, in magazines little and big, specialized and general, on newspaper op-ed pages—and in every fresh-

man and upper division writing course in the country, as well as in discipline-related courses. My work here is a sign that essays are significant enough to be thought of in canonical terms. Robert Atwan's *Best American Essays* (since 1986)—now rivaled by Phillip Lopate's *Anchor Essay Annual* (1997)—Joseph Epstein's *Norton Book of Personal Essays* (1997), Lopate's large anthology *Art of the Personal Essay* (1994), and Tracy Chevalier's mammoth *Encyclopedia of the Essay* (1997) are signs that essays are being read—and read about in ways that respect, as Lopate says, their “density of thought,” their “living voices,” their ability to provide “mental adventure” (*Best x*). All of this is proof that essays will not, need not, be ghettoized in their academic setting, reprinted in Readers treated as separate from and unequal to mainstream literature anthologies—Readers whose hospitality to this genre during a century of exile cannot be overestimated.

There is one significant oversight that rankles. Essays might as well be written in invisible ink as far as the calls for proposals of the conferences of two of our major professional organizations, CCCC and MLA, are concerned. Essays are not yet included as a matter of course among CCCC's categories of “Nonfiction and Creative Writing,” identified in the 1999 “Call” as “autobiography, biography, travel and nature writing, and journalism and documentary”—an ironic but conspicuous oversight in an organization devoted to teaching the reading and writing of essays. Although MLA has recently formed divisions on “Autobiography, Biography, and Life Writing” and “Nonfiction Prose Studies, Excluding Biography and Autobiography,” *essay* makes only cameo appearances in MLA convention programs, either by genre or by author. In 1997, for instance, these nonfiction sessions focused on “Writing About Places,” “The Nineteenth-Century Black Press,” and “Personal and Political Texts by Women Activists.”

Nevertheless, in the past decade our professional journals have been receptive to the genre in publishing articles about essays and writing by essayistic academicians such as Peter Elbow and Nancy Sommers. NCTE is sponsoring a professional development conference in 1999 on “Stories in the Classroom: Narration as Knowledge,” derived from Joseph Trimmer's *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life* (1997), a collection of creative nonfiction. Composition studies books with conspicuous essayistic elements thrive: among others, Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* (1989), Richard Murphy's *The Calculus of Intimacy* (1993), Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps* (1993), Wendy Bishop's *Teaching Lives* (1997), and my own *Composition Studies as a Creative Art* (1998). Many more are in the works.

As we have seen, essays—the Cinderella genre—have been steadily climbing up from the basement in the House of Literature to reclaim their place wherever serious but pleasurable reading is done. Certainly as long as essays are taught as the academy's lingua franca there will be an essay canon, hardy and versatile, that students will read. If tomorrow's students approach these essays in the spirit in which they were written, or were discovered by receptive readers such as Ning Yu, they

will also be inspired to understand and appreciate the ideals of a free society, a liberal education—truth, justice, the spirit of inquiry. In this ethos they will learn to think critically, and to write with some measure, we can hope, of the eloquence and elegance that reside in the most distinguished essays they read. Whether the critical stepsisters reconfigure the critical canon to make a place for essays is far less important than that common readers and writers, and, yes, composition teachers, will surely continue to take this most attractive genre to the dance.

**APPENDIX 1: THE CANONICAL READERS THAT PROVIDE
THE DATABASE FOR “THE ESSAY CANON”**

Compiled by Valerie M. Smith

Because of space restrictions, this list includes only titles, numbers of editions, and dates; names of editors and publishers, both of which change frequently, have been omitted. The complete bibliography will be published in *The Essay Canon*.

- 75 Readings: An Anthology*. 5 editions. 1987–1995.
Assignments in Exposition. 11 editions. 1946–1994.
Bedford Reader. 5 editions. 1982–1994.
Borzoi College Reader. 7 editions. 1967–1992.
Collection of Readings for Writers. 6 editions. 1946–1967.
College English: The First Year. 8 editions. 1952–1982.
Compact Reader. 5 editions. 1984–1996.
Conscious Reader. 6 editions. 1974–1995.
Contexts for Composition. 5 editions. 1965–1979.
Crossing Cultures. 4 editions. 1983–1994.
Current Issues and Enduring Questions. 4 editions. 1987–1996.
Current Thinking and Writing. 7 editions. 1946–1976.
Dolphin Reader. 4 editions. 1986–1996.
Eight Modern Essayists. 6 editions. 1965–1995.
Elements of Argument. 4 editions. 1985–1994.
Essay Connection: Readings for Writers. 4 editions. 1984–1995.
The Essayist. 5 editions. 1963–1985.
Exploring Language. 7 editions. 1977–1995.
Fields of Writing. 4 editions. 1984–1994.
Harbrace College Reader. 6 editions. 1959–1984.
Invention and Design. 4 editions. 1975–1985.
Life Studies: An Analytic Reader. 5 editions. 1983–1995.

- Literary Reflections*. 4 editions. 1967–1982.
- Little, Brown Reader*. 7 editions. 1977–1996.
- Macmillan Reader*. 4 editions. 1987–1996.
- McGraw-Hill Reader*. 5 editions. 1982–1994.
- Models for Writers*. 5 editions. 1982–1995.
- Norton Reader*. 9 editions. 1965–1996.
- Norton Reader, Shorter Editions*. 9 editions. 1965–1996.
- Norton Sampler*. 4 editions. 1979–1993.
- Our Times*. 4 editions. 1989–1995.
- Outlooks and Insights*. 4 editions. 1983–1995.
- Patterns: A Short Prose Reader*. 4 editions. 1983–1994.
- Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader and Guide*. 6 editions. 1980–1995.
- Patterns of Exposition*. 14 editions. 1966–1995.
- Patterns Plus*. 5 editions. 1985–1995.
- Prentice Hall Reader*. 4 editions. 1986–1995.
- Problems in Prose*. 5 editions. 1950–1963.
- Prose Models*. 10 editions. 1964–1996.
- Prose Reader*. 4 editions. 1987–1996.
- Reading Critically, Writing Well*. 4 editions. 1987–1996.
- Reading for Rhetoric*. 4 editions. 1962–1979.
- Reading, Writing, and Rhetoric*. 5 editions. 1967–1983.
- Readings for a Liberal Education*. 5 editions. 1948–1967.
- Readings for Writers*. 8 editions. 1974–1995.
- Rhetorical Considerations*. 4 editions. 1974–1984.
- Riverside Reader*. 5 editions. 1981–1996.
- Short Essays*. 7 editions. 1977–1995.
- Short Prose Reader*. 7 editions. 1979–1994.
- Short Takes: Model Essays for Composition*. 5 editions. 1983–1996.
- Strategies in Prose*. 5 editions. 1968–1983.
- Subject and Strategy: A Rhetoric Reader*. 7 editions. 1978–1996.
- Subject and Structure: An Anthology for Writers*. 8 editions. 1963–1984.
- Ways of Reading*. 4 editions. 1987–1996.
- World of Ideas*. 4 editions. 1983–1994.
- Writer's Reader*. 7 editions. 1976–1994.
- Writing with a Thesis: A Rhetoric and Reader*. 6 editions. 1976–1994.
- Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*. 5 editions. 1982–1994.

**APPENDIX 2: CANONICAL AUTHORS,
WITH MOST FREQUENTLY REPRINTED TITLES**

Compiled by Valerie M. Smith and Lori Corsini-Nelson

This list includes only the 50 essayists whose works have been most frequently reprinted; the discussion within the text, however, is based on all 174 canonical essayists. Essayists are listed in descending order of frequency. The longer tables to be published in the book *The Essay Canon* will reveal where a given piece was first published and its migration history.

	<i>Author</i>	<i>Number of Reprints</i>	<i>Number of Titles</i>	<i>Number of Anthologies</i>	<i>Number of Editions</i>	<i>Begin- ning Date</i>
	<i>Most Frequently Reprinted Title(s)</i>					
1	George Orwell "Politics and the English Language" "Shooting An Elephant"	357 118 113	19	45	221	1952
2	E. B. White "Once More to the Lake"	268 88	37	40	177	1946
3	Joan Didion "On Keeping a Notebook"	219 44	30	43	151	1971
4	Lewis Thomas "Notes on Punctuation"	204 21	50	41	141	1976
5	Henry David Thoreau "Civil Disobedience"	180 48	29	35	139	1948
6	Virginia Woolf "The Death of the Moth"	177 44	26	37	122	1946
7	Jonathan Swift "A Modest Proposal"	173 151	7	38	163	1957
8	Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter From Birmingham Jail" "I Have a Dream"	165 50 68	14	35	145	1967
9	James Thurber "University Days"	158 35	35	31	116	1946
10	Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain) "Two Views . . ."	143 25	30	32	131	1946
11	Annie Dillard "Sight into Insight"	136 21	39	37	109	1974
12	Thomas Jefferson The Declaration of Independence	132 96	9	28	110	1952
13	Russell Baker "The Plot Against People"	126 21	45	37	99	1967
14	Loren Eiseley "The Brown Wasps"	121 25	31	28	108	1960
15	E. M. Forster "My Wood"	118 47	11	22	86	1957
16	Maya Angelou "Graduation"	113 44	16	26	105	1973
17	Ellen Goodman "The Company Man"	112 11	45	33	95	1979
18	James Baldwin "Stranger in the Village"	102 37	15	25	82	1962

	<i>Author</i>	<i>Number of Reprints</i>	<i>Number of Titles</i>	<i>Number of Antbologies</i>	<i>Number of Editions</i>	<i>Begin- ning Date</i>
	<i>Most Frequently Reprinted Title(s)</i>					
19	Richard Rodriguez "Aria"	99 23	21	34	94	1977
20	Plato "The Allegory of the Cave"	96 45	8	23	80	1948
21	William Zinsser "College Pressures"	87 18	14	21	78	1968
22	Alice Walker "Beauty: When the Other Dancer . . ."	86 24	15	30	70	1976
23	Stephen Jay Gould "Evolution as Fact and Theory"	85 8	28	25	61	1980
24	Bertrand Russell "A Free Man's Worship"	84 14	27	23	67	1948
25	Bruce Catton "Grant and Lee"	81 70	8	19	80	1959
26.5	Margaret Mead "The Gift of Autonomy"	78 7	29	27	68	1948
26.5	S. I. Hayakawa "How Dictionaries Are Made"	78 16	17	20	61	1946
28.5	Langston Hughes "Salvation"	77 74	3	20	74	1963
28.5	Isaac Asimov "The Eureka Phenemonon"	77 10	28	25	67	1965
30.5	C. S. Lewis "The Efficacy of Prayer"	76 8	21	18	61	1948
30.5	Bruno Bettelheim "A Victim"	76 17	17	22	67	1965
32	H. L. Mencken "The Penalty of Death"	75 14	15	22	67	1948
33	Judy [Syfers] Brady "I Want a Wife"	71 71	1	18	71	1972
34	Norman Cousins "Who Killed Benny Paret?"	67 17	21	24	61	1948
35	Jessica Mitford "Behind the Formaldehyde Curtain"	65 18	14	16	63	1972
36	Marya Mannes "How Do You Know It's Good?"	64 22	17	17	51	1963
37	Gilbert Highet "The Mystery of Zen"	63 12	15	20	55	1952
38	D. H. Lawrence "Pornography"	62 11	20	14	50	1962
39	Francis Bacon "The Idols"	60 26	10	15	50	1948
40	Tom Wolfe "O Rotten Gotham . . ."	59 15	17	20	58	1968
41	N. Scott Momaday "The Way to Rainy Mountain"	56 50	5	22	55	1972

	<i>Author</i>	<i>Number of Reprints</i>	<i>Number of Titles</i>	<i>Number of Anthologies</i>	<i>Number of Editions</i>	<i>Begin- ning Date</i>
	<i>Most Frequently Reprinted Title(s)</i>					
42	Joseph Wood Krutch "Killing for Sport"	55 10	26	19	48	1946
43	John Ciardi "... An ulcer, gentlemen ..."	54 10	12	15	48	1952
44	Rachel Carson "A Fable for Tomorrow"	54 15	13	19	54	1952
45	Richard Selzer "The Discus Thrower"	53 20	17	20	49	1978
46	Jacob Bronowski "The Reach of Imagination"	53 23	11	17	45	1964
47	Maxine Hong Kingston "No Name Woman"	52 12	13	20	49	1980
48	Thomas H. Huxley "Comfort"	52 5	5	15	49	1946
49.5	Eudora Welty "One Writer's Beginnings"	51 10	18	19	46	1971
49.5	Gloria Steinem "Why Young Women Are ..."	51 10	14	22	49	1972

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