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## Private, the Public, and the Published

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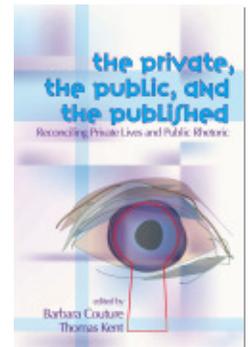
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### THE ESSAYIST IN—AND BEHIND—THE ESSAY

#### *Vested Writers, Invested Readers*

Lynn Z. Bloom

VOICE-OVER: *Our telephone was tapped during the eight years it took to write and publish Doctor Spock: Biography of a Conservative Radical—my hopeful contribution to ending the Vietnam War. When I'd pick up the receiver to dial out, I'd hear mysterious clicks, breathing—sometimes even panting, but never a voice. Sometimes the line would go dead. I have never again experienced the sense of a palpating but silent presence on the other end of the line except for a brief stay in Bucharest during the depths of the Ceausescu regime. Our approved Intourist hotel was so close to a thicket of radio relay towers that the spies could have peeped through the window, but they evidently preferred the phone. It rang at random hours of the day and night to deliver breathing and static. No voice, not even in a language I couldn't understand.*

#### THE PRODIGIOUS PRESENCE OF SUPERSTAR ESSAYISTS

This chapter will demonstrate that the work of superstar canonical essayists is qualitatively different from that of many other essayists (including many canonical essayists of lesser luminosity) in one significant respect—the intensely felt presence of the essayist within the essay. This ethos is comprised of the author's ethical and intellectual stance toward the subject—and perhaps the world—and manifested in the essayist's characteristic voice and literary style. These constitute the author's persona, distinctive and ongoing, sustained from one work to the next. Verisimilitude notwithstanding, the essayist behind the essay is not necessarily the character, the *I*, “the singular first person” who appears in the essay. This essayist-in-the-essay, apparently artless and transparent, is actually a work of art to which readers—even those sophisticated enough to know the character represented is a carefully constructed artifact—react as if it were the real person whom they know and—usually—

love. Indeed, personal essays that successfully reach audiences year after year, generation after generation, demonstrate that a writer's private presence in the essay is most effectively transmitted through a distinct public persona. As Scott Russell Sanders, himself a canonical essayist, observes in "The Singular First Person": "Brassy or shy, center stage or hanging back in the wings, the author's persona commands our attention. For the length of an essay, or a book of essays, we respond to that persona as we would to a friend caught up in a rapturous monologue" (194).

The appendix to this chapter, "Discovering the Essay Canon," explains the research method by which I established the existence of an essay canon and identified the canonical essayists and their canonical essays—those most widely anthologized in readers used in first-year American college composition courses from 1946 to 1996. Readers are collections of essays and other nonfiction works—speeches (Lincoln's Gettysburg Address), fables (Thurber's "Fables for Our Time"), satires ("A Modest Proposal," for instance, is a patently fictional work that is usually treated as nonfiction), and letters (although Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is in letter format, I would argue that it is, in fact, an essay)—that are regarded as essays for pedagogical purposes.

Extremely popular canonical essays, those by the twenty superstars with 480 reprints or more, satisfy the felt sense that they have not only transcended time, if not culture, but that the canon could not exist without them. Virtually all of these writers (except two authors of documents that are not essays, Thomas Jefferson as first author of the Declaration of Independence and Plato as author of "The Allegory of the Cave") convey a powerful sense of a human being within and behind the writing that many other perfectly competent nonfiction writers—including many canonical essayists of lesser ranking—exhibit less memorably or not at all, even when they are writing on subjects of comparable significance. These are the canonical superstars, like the rich whom Fitzgerald allegedly told Hemingway are "different from you and me."

George Orwell heads the list, with 1,785 reprints of such essays as "Politics and the English Language" and "Shooting an Elephant", his work is included in virtually every reader published during the second half of the twentieth century. E. B. White, with 1,340 reprints—including "Once More to the Lake" and "The Ring of Time"—is a close second. Then come: 3) Joan Didion, 1,095 reprints; 4) Lewis Thomas, 1,020; 5)

Henry David Thoreau, 900; 6) Virginia Woolf, 885; 7) Jonathan Swift, 865; 8) Martin Luther King, Jr., 825; 9) James Thurber, 790; 10) Mark Twain, 715; 11) Annie Dillard, 680; 12) Thomas Jefferson, 660; 13) Russell Baker, 630; 14) Loren Eiseley, 605; 15) E. M. Forster, 590; 16) Maya Angelou, 565; 17) Ellen Goodman, 560; 18) James Baldwin, 510; 19) Richard Rodriguez, 495; and 20) Plato, 480.

(A parenthetical observation to keep in mind to contrast with the canonical superstars. At the bottom of the canon list are twenty authors with 100–10 reprints apiece: Hannah Arendt, Michael Arlen, Sigmund Freud, Dick Gregory, Sidney J. Harris, Jane Jacobs, Alfred Kazin, X. J. Kennedy, Robin Lakoff, Ashley Montagu, Gloria Naylor, Chief Seattle, Eric Sevareid, George Bernard Shaw, Gail Sheehy, William Stafford, John Steinbeck, Alvin Toffler, Gore Vidal, and Edmund Wilson. Try this test. What works of these authors come to mind? Many have reputations as writers of novels, poetry, drama, psychiatric treatises, urban analysis, or theology, and it is likely you would identify their best-known works first. If you can think of essays or longer pieces of nonfiction written by any of these authors, what works are these? I surmise that if readers do associate a specific authorial presence or persona with each or any of these writers, it will be the presence that emanates from their best-known works in the genres and fields where their reputations lie—fiction for Naylor, drama for Shaw, poetry for Stafford—rather than through their essays.)

#### **“THE SINGULAR FIRST PERSON”: THE AUTHORIAL PRESENCE OF SUPERSTAR ESSAYISTS**

Simply—and subjectively—put, for an essayist to become a canonical superstar, teachers—and by extrapolation, their students—have to love the performance. Readers respond vigorously to the work and thus to the author whose presence emerges in and through the writing. By and large, they love the writer they come to know as a more or less constant presence from one canonical favorite to another: the George Orwell of “Shooting an Elephant,” “Marrakech,” and “Politics and the English Language”; the E. B. White who emerges in and through “Once More to the Lake,” “The Death of a Pig,” and “Walden”; the Joan Didion of “Why I Write,” “On Keeping a Notebook,” and “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream.” Yet when the narrator of a superstar essay elicits loathing, as the monstrously bland narrator of Swift’s “Modest Proposal” is calculated to

do, readers are expected to recognize and respect the ethical distance between the actual author and his created character (even though some naive readers elide the two). For better or for worse, as Scott Russell Sanders explains: “It is the *singularity* of the first person—its warts and crochets and turn of voice” (196)—to which readers respond as if that first person were a real person.

Essayists themselves are under no illusions about the illusory characters they create, nor about why they do so. The author’s self-presentation as simple and unadorned is as old as the genre, invented by Montaigne, who artfully began the tradition of artlessness, as well. He slyly explains “To the Reader” of *Essays*: “I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray. My defects will here be read to the life, and also my natural form.” Custom permitting, Montaigne says he would “very gladly have portrayed [himself] here entire and wholly naked” (qtd. in Sanders 195).

Contemporary canonical superstars have addressed this subject in a comparable vein. Thoreau opens *Walden*—of which textbook excerpts are treated as essay—by observing: “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 [whether or not the pronoun is there to send that signal].” Adds Thoreau: “I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well” (3). E. B. White introduces his own selected *Essays* by acknowledging that although the essayist “can pull on any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter—philosopher, scold, jester, raconteur, confidant, pundit, devil’s advocate, enthusiast,” he must tell the absolute truth. Lest readers suspect that this multiplicity of roles might lead to artifice and role-playing, White—drawing again on the example of Montaigne, who “had the gift of natural candour”—confidently asserts that the essayist “cannot indulge himself in deceit or in concealment, for he will be found out in no time” (vii-viii). Although George Orwell in “Why I Write”—a literary manifesto written near the end of the author’s short life—concludes that “one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one’s own personality,” he acknowledges that all writers—members of a small class of “gifted, willful people who are determined to live their own lives to the end”—are driven by “sheer egoism.” Ego motivates the “desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to

be remembered after death.” Essay writers also share three other motives: “(2) Esthetic enthusiasm . . . [;] (3) Historical impulse . . . to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity [; and] (4) Political purpose . . . [that is,] desire to push the world in a certain direction” (316). And in her version of “Why I Write,” Joan Didion, acknowledging that she stole the title from Orwell, gets right to the point—the egoistic emphasis of the “*I, I, I*” sounds in the title: “In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*” (44).

Such pronouncements could easily lead readers to expect that superstar canonical essayists are writing autobiography, itself a highly constructed artifact despite autobiographers’ protestations of truthfulness (see Gusdorf; Mandel; Howarth). However, the only autobiographers among the top twenty are Maya Angelou (virtually all her “essays” are editorially selected excerpts from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) and Richard Rodriguez, with chapters or excerpts of chapters from the autobiographical *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. Indeed, although the essays’ readers could glean occasional “facts” about the lives of the canonical superstars, these are insufficient to present even a fragmentary sketch of the writer’s life. For instance, in “Once More to the Lake,” White tells us about the time the narrator and his unnamed son spent an idyllic week at an unnamed lake in Maine, doing a variety of activities (boating, fishing, swimming) that White himself had enjoyed as a boy vacationing at the same lake. But however ample or minimal, such autobiographical information is beside the point. The essayist’s point of view—as signaled by the “*I, I, I*”—is the focal point of authorial presence, as Scott Russell Sanders explains in “The Singular First Person” and Gordon Harvey elaborates on in “Presence in the Essay.”

After modestly claiming that the essayist, in comparison with poets, playwrights, and novelists, “must be content in his self-imposed role of second-class citizen,” E. B. White admits that “some people find the essay the last resort of the egoist, a much too self-conscious and self-serving form for their taste; they think that it is presumptuous of a writer to assume that his little excursions or his small observations will interest the reader.” Acknowledging the “justice in their complaint,” White adds, “I have always been aware that I am by nature self-absorbed and egotistical; 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” (vii-viii). Not

so, explains Sanders, for contrary to the autobiographer's practice of looking inward, the superstar essayists are looking outward on the creation that is the world. As White says in "The Ring of Time": "As a writing man or secretary, I have always felt charged with the safekeeping of all unexpected items of worldly or unworldly enchantment, as though I might be held personally responsible if even a small one were to be lost" (143). These superstars know that, as Sanders says of his own essays: "The public does not give a hoot about my private life." He adds: "I choose to write about my experience not because it is mine, but because it seems to me a door through which others might pass" (197–98).

Indeed, the perspective of the first person singular that dominates the essay is that of the essayist who opens doors to others' common experience. (That all essayists are embedded in constraints of class, ethnicity, gender, physical and emotional functioning, age, time, and culture is today's truism; that no writer can claim universal connections with a universal audience does not negate the fact that the work does establish a great many significant relationships.) This perspective establishes the authorial presence within the world of each individual essay that creates the bond with the readers, the ethos, that persists from one essay to another. It should be noted that presence (amplified below) is a more robust concept than voice, even as addressed in Carl Leggo's comprehensive list of ninety-nine "Questions I Need to Ask before I Advise My Students to Write in Their Own Voices" (ranging from "What is there of desire in voice?" to "Is voice like a thumbprint—unique?" [145–50]) as elaborated on in Peter Elbow's sophisticated discussion of "audible voice or intonation in writing," "dramatic voice in writing," "recognizable or distinctive voice in writing," and "voice with authority" xxiv–xxxiii). When Elbow addresses the last item on his list, "resonant voice or presence," he finds "trouble—the swamp" because this concept embeds questions of authorial sincerity, authenticity, and relationship to the "real character" of the "actual author" beyond the text (xxxiii–xlii). The answer, he says, lies in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, in which he "clearly implies what common sense tells us: we are not persuaded by the implied author as such—that is, by the creation of a dramatic voice that sounds trustworthy; we are only persuaded if we believe that dramatic voice is the voice of the actual speaker or author" (xlii). (Elbow elaborates: "We don't buy a used car from someone just because we admire their dramatic skill in creating a fictional trustworthy voice. If ethos is nothing *but*

implied author, it loses all power of persuasion.”) This presence constitutes the sense of the essayist *in* the essay; the more powerful the sense of presence, the more likely the essayist is to be a superstar.

It is this sense of presence that Gordon Harvey anatomizes in “Presence in the Essay.” In an explanation that reinforces the observations of White and Sanders, he says:

If a piece of autobiographical writing *is* an essay, it has already moved beyond private confession or memoir to some shareable idea, for which the personal experience works as evidence. This move from experience to idea, and then, through painful revision, from a dull idea and simple, narrative structure to an interesting idea and structure, bringing general insights out in the particulars and erasing narcissism, is precisely the great challenge and the great value of the personal essay as a Freshman Writing assignment—this and the broadened sense it gives of what can count as evidence for ideas. (648)

The “personal” in essays is not necessarily “represented by autobiographical anecdote and image or by explicit self-analysis and introspection,” but rather by authorial presence. Presence, Harvey says, “is the concept we invoke when we feel life in writing, when we feel an individual invested in a subject and freely directing the essay—not surrendering control to a discipline’s conventions, or to a party line, or to easy sentiments and structures, or to stock phrases” (650).

In general, readers don’t know or care much about the essayist behind the essay except to assume that figure to be intellectually and ethically congruent with the writer whose perspective appears in public. By and large this assumption is warranted to the extent that the author’s ethos—disposition, character, and fundamental values—is stable in person and in print. And this assumption holds true even when readers know that an author such as Virginia Woolf is writing on her more cheerful days rather than from depression, or that George Orwell’s unverifiable accounts of “A Hanging” and “Shooting an Elephant” do not depend on “factual, historical veracity” but on fidelity to the generic experience of colonial officers in Burma (Crick 85, 95–96, 112).

*VOICE-OVER: During the course of my research, Dr. Spock and four others were prosecuted by the federal government for conspiring to encourage students to resist the draft during the Vietnam War. The FBI agents who testified were to a man rigidly erect in posture and testimony, literalists all—with no acknowledgment of the figurative that pervades the language their wiretappers would have*

*overheard—metaphor, hyperbole, understatement. What someone said or wrote, they meant. Thus “Oh, I’d like to kill her” could be construed as an intent to commit murder, rather than a comment of exasperation.*

#### “ONCE MORE TO THE LAKE” AS AN EXAMPLE OF AUTHORIAL PRESENCE

Harvey goes on to explain the process and technical means by which essays, including academic writing, can “be *informed* by personal experience without injecting personal *information*” or even the personal pronoun, “a matter of felt life in the writing rather than anecdote or self-analysis” (649). Although presence is “everywhere” in an essay, it is particularly apparent in the six aspects of the essay that Harvey identifies, which I will analyze here as they are manifested in “Once More to the Lake,” using male pronouns to accommodate the male author.

Harvey’s first aspect is (1) *motive*. Usually in the introduction the writer establishes, for himself and his readers, why the subject is “interesting enough to pursue,” “why it isn’t simply obvious, why there’s a mystery to unfold”—in brief, why the essay needs to be written (Harvey 650). At the outset White announces that throughout his childhood his family spent every August at a lake in Maine: “none of us ever thought there was any place in the world like [it].” Although I have “since become a salt water man,” says White, “there are days when the restlessness of the tides and the fearful cold of the sea water and the incessant wind that blows . . . make me wish for the placidity of a lake in the woods” like the one of the childhood summers (197). To recapture this “sacred” time and place, he returns to the same lake with his son, and the story begins. The element of the quest is subdued but omnipresent: can a father reexperience the past and transmit this legacy, and its meanings, to his son?

The second aspect Harvey identifies is (2) *development*. Presence, says Harvey, “is manifest, along with pleasure, sometimes wonder and even passion, in a willingness to pursue a topic through twists and turns: to see in it, and follow it through, its various aspects and complications and sub-ideas, which not just anybody would think of or predict.” The real issue “isn’t between orderly and disorderly development, or between linear and nonlinear; it’s between dull, mechanical order and complex, alert order, whose creation and control manifest presence” (650–51). White signals this alertness in the second paragraph, when he explains the associative nature of the juxtaposition of past and present that he

proffers throughout the essay: “It is strange how much you can remember about places [like the lake, “this unique, this holy spot”] once you allow your mind to return into the grooves that lead back. You remember one thing, and that suddenly reminds you of another thing.” He reaffirms this, with a surprise—as much to himself as to the readers—in the fourth paragraph: “I began to sustain the illusion that [my young son] was I, and therefore, by simple transposition, that I was my father. . . . I seemed to be living a dual existence. I would be in the middle of some simple act . . . and suddenly it would be not I but my father who was saying the words or making the gesture” (198).

White’s fifth paragraph illustrates all of the remaining characteristics Harvey describes concurrently:<sup>(3)</sup> “*Control of quotation* [when the writer is responding to other texts] *and detail*”—through original metaphors, similes, metonymic details that indicate “the feeling of a mind engaged in the subject at hand,” not grandstanding razzle-dazzle; “*An awareness of cliché and what doesn’t need saying*,” witty allusions to readers’ shared knowledge and experiences; *broadenings* of the subject (“It’s a mistake,” says Harvey, to think that particulars only “particularize,” when in fact they can broaden out the discussion, perhaps drawing on “the essayist’s experiential grasp of human behavior, of how life tends to go”); and *judgments and reasons*, “Giving specific reasons for one’s general impressions . . . happens also to be its most personal aspect” (651–52).

White’s fifth paragraph illustrates all of the above characteristics concurrently. To establish the convergence of past and present, White repeats “the same” in detail upon detail of going fishing the first morning: “the same damp moss” covers the worms in the bait can; “the small waves were the same”—original detail—“chucking the rowboat under the chin”; and “the boat was the same boat, the same color green and the ribs broken in the same places, and under the floorboards the same freshwater leavings.” A dragonfly lights on the tip of his rod, convincing him “beyond any doubt that everything was as it always had been, that the years were a mirage and that there had been no years.” Despite the comfortable familiarity of these phenomena, White uses no clichés. Nor does he spell out his interpretations, trusting that if he presents appropriate information his readers will understand the music as well as the words. Indeed, he broadens the subject even as he embeds his interpretations in the telling details: “I looked at the boy [whose name does not matter], who was silently watching his fly, and it was my hands that held his rod,

my eyes watching. I felt dizzy and didn't know which rod I was at the end of" (198–99). White's presence here is far more profound than a voice; it is an active, engaged mind in motion, even in the stillness of the event.

The essay, originally published in the *New Yorker* in August 1941, re-created for its sophisticated, urban audience the rhythms and events of a summertime-out-of-time "pattern of life indelible, the fadeproof lake, the woods unshatterable, the pasture with the sweetfern and the juniper forever and ever, summer without end" (White 200). Whether or not White's readers have ever gone to the woods (with their overtone of Thoreau's *Walden*, where one could live "deliberately"), White invites them there, to that special segment of the universe in the last tranquil summer before the cataclysm of World War II, where grandfather and father and son blend in an indissoluble union. This essay has withstood sixty years of intervening shifts in reading (and to a lesser extent teaching), and some critical bashing from post-structuralist, postmodern, neo-Marxist, feminist, multiethnic and a plethora of other critical perspectives. Its survival attests to its resonance in human terms for generations of readers—women as well as men—who value the essay's real subject, the human connections White celebrates. Moreover, it is pedagogically versatile and can be taught for its narrative, implied argument, comparison and contrast, illustration, characterization, tone, structure (of sentence, paragraph, and whole work), and pace, as well as this myriad of themes.

The actual person of E. B. White, the existential human being, is irrelevant to the authorial presence conveyed within the body of his work. Readers' response to the intensely felt presence of the author in this essay carries over to their reading of White's other widely reprinted essays as well; the process is the same for all other canonical superstars, among them Orwell, Didion, Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurber, and Twain. This sense of authorial presence, when coupled with other features of teachable texts identified above (such as intellectual relevance, accessibility, and length) is predictive of future canonical superstars as well. These are the contemporary belletristic writers whose essays are beginning to appear in textbooks in significant numbers, essayists whom some critical readers already refer to as "canonical" because of the felt sense that their presence is indispensable. Tomorrow's superstar shoo-ins (some of whom are already on the canonical list) include Sherman Alexie, Diane Ackerman, Gloria

Anzaldúa, Dave Eggers, Anne Fadiman, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Jamaica Kincaid, Scott Russell Sanders, Shelby Steele, Gary Soto, Amy Tan, David Foster Wallace, and Jhumpa Lahiri, if only she'd write more essays.

*VOICE-OVER: Here's what the FBI eavesdroppers in Cleveland, Indianapolis, St. Louis would have heard: Colloquies in disembodied voices. Conversations with academic colleagues, editors, and students about work-in-progress. Arrangements with neighbors about car pools, play groups, peace marches, integration efforts, and the elementary school's annual geranium sale (run, of course, by the Blooms). One babysitter's routine calls—on the job—to her bookie.*

*After my initial call to Dr. Spock—"I've recently finished my Michigan doctoral dissertation on literary biography and now I'd like to write a real biography—of you"—we talked only in person. Whether the FBI ever provided a context for the fragments of lives they overheard, ever sought to assemble whole presences from the auditory mosaic that tumbled into their tapes, I do not know. Literalists would leave out the laughter, the fun and effort of the process, the exhilaration born of the hope that this writer—myself—an author behind the author of America's best-known baby book—would and could change the world.*

## ISSUES IN TEACHING CANONICAL ESSAYISTS

Teachers who distrust personal-sounding writing in the classroom respond to such texts—particularly student papers—with suspicion and distrust, and perhaps with readings more literal than the writing warrants. The authorial presence sends the wrong message in an academic universe, they say, making little allowance for the literary artistry—shaping characters, establishing a voice and an individual style—that they reward in fiction and poetry (see Bartholomae "Inventing"; Bizzell "Cognition"). Not so. The essayist's human presence raises ethical problems (for innocent or forgetful readers) and possibilities for teaching writing and for reinvigorated academic writing that I have space to discuss only briefly.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Author-evacuated texts, conventional academic articles, appear objective, impartial, as William H. Gass says in "Emerson and the Essay," "complete and straightforward and footnoted and useful and certain" and "unassailable," and are therefore "a veritable Michelin of misdirection" (25). Author-saturated texts may be equally misleading. Readers expect

honesty, openness, intimacy; a writer as personal-sounding as Orwell or Didion or White is trusted to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This trust in the personal is paramount, in spite of what teachers as well as authors know about the aesthetic necessity—and latitude—in shaping characters, setting scenes, representing dialogue, and other features common to both fiction and creative nonfiction. In a variety of circumstances—political, religious, cultural, academic—audiences trust the messenger and so they adopt the message. Thus teachers have an obligation to make it clear that like all forms of literature all essays, however personal or impersonal, are constructs. Wendy Bishop offers teachers “Places to Stand,” saying that as a reflective writer-teacher-writer, “I still need a place to write from, a writer’s identity; as a teacher, I need to ask students to question the self they are constructing in their physical texts and in the actual classroom” (22). Harvey provides practical advice in “Presence in the Essay” on how teachers can teach their students to create such constructs by employing the features of presence he has explicated (649–53) and that I have used above in analyzing “Once More to the Lake.”

### **Pedagogical Influence**

Personal presence gives essayist superstars, like canonical authors in other genres, significance in the field disproportionate to their numbers. Although they are not the rock stars of the belletristic world, because their essays have been reprinted so widely, their influence has the potential for being profound. Yet we can ask whether these essayists have really affected the way the millions of student readers in the past fifty years have seen the world. Have these essayists caused their readers to think and act on the subjects their works address—civil and human rights, education, culture and multiculturalism, science and technology, writing and the arts? Is the superstar influence actually as profound as its potential?

As many textbooks reveal, students are obliged to read essays as prose models to emulate, even in process-oriented courses. In courses focusing on critical thinking, argumentation, or disciplinary issues, students are expected to read critically, take an intellectual stand, and enter into the agonistic language and dialectical postures of the academy. But most of the superstars’ work is reflective, interpretive instead; it invites readers to enter the writer’s world, look around, deepen their understanding, and come to their own interpretations and conclusions about that world.

Some of these interpretations could, however, lead to social action—even to civil disobedience or more extreme activity—for a number of the essays by canonical superstars are revolutionary. These include Swift’s “Modest Proposal”; Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language,” “Shooting an Elephant,” and “Marrakech”; Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience”; Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”; and the Declaration of Independence. Yet Americans—teachers and students alike—tend to respond to these as historical documents, rather than as incitements to social action (see Bloom, “Essay Canon” 419–22). If essays such as these will make the students more thoughtful, morally better people (perhaps in emulation of the author’s presence) or move them to noble or socially responsible action, it is hard to discern such effects in any given composition class. It is impossible to find any empirical research on the subject other than individual teachers’ claims to success, such as Bruce Herzberg’s “Community Service and Critical Teaching.” To recontextualize any essay, no matter how inspiring or incendiary, in a textbook and a school setting is for most college students to blunt the keen edge of the excitement—intellectual, political, aesthetic—that inspired the author to write it in the first place.

Teachers should expect to expend some effort to override the anesthetic effects of anthologization, to help transform students from passive readers of entombed works, however canonical, to active responders to living words, the lively presences within and behind the essays they read. If, for example, students read “Shooting an Elephant” only as a course requirement or as a personal essay—in this case, an episode of a junior colonial officer’s humiliation before Burmese “coolies” long ago and far away—they miss the point. If they read it in isolation from other canonical works of civil disobedience they miss the point. Teachers can help students understand a work’s importance in its original and its current contexts—political, social, intellectual, aesthetic. Thereby teachers can reinvigorate significant essays by encouraging students to make meaningful connections—among the past and present implications of a given work and among works on related topics (say, issues of civil disobedience, human rights, or multiculturalism). As such works come alive to the students, so will their meaning and their invitations (implicit and explicit) to think—and to act, to change the world. This transformative potential of literature is one of the foundational principles of Kurt Spellmeyer’s forthcoming *The Arts of Living: Remaking the Humanities for the Twenty-first Century*.

## Reinvigorating the Genre

If more teachers wrote essays or academic articles with presence that acknowledged their authorial investment, they would be better able to teach students not only the craft but the art. Until recently, composition studies scholars took the ideas—and indeed the personae—of academic essayists with presence, such as Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, Mike Rose, and Nancy Sommers—to heart but dismissed or trivialized the genre in which they wrote as too obvious, too easy, too confessional: “U.S. composition teachers have created a school genre that can exist only in an expressivist composition classroom” (Dixon 257). However, now that more academics have begun to try such writing themselves, they have realized how hard it is, in the absence of a predictable form and conventional academic language, to present profound ideas simply, with elegance and apparent ease. It is even harder to create a credible persona of the sort that appears with regularity in such publications as the *American Scholar*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Writing on the Edge*, *Fourth Genre*, and the serial volumes of *Best American Essays*, among others. Yet they are also experiencing the rewards; while conventional academic articles engender citations, personal essays inspire fan mail, dissertation chapters, invitations to parties—and republication.

As writers of the genre, teachers and other essayists can with greater authority show students ways to convey the presence that can transform their own worlds and their relationship to their readers from distance and abstraction to immediacy and engagement. As writers of personal-sounding essays, teachers could speak with authority about the inevitable disparity between the private person behind the work and ways to translate salient elements of self-characterization to the public document. They could have students try to consciously control features such as motive, voice, degree and nature of investment in the subject, with an awareness that what beats on the page is the vitality of the writer’s vision, not the bleeding heart of the writer behind the work.

VOICE-OVER: *In 1993 the Massachusetts Civil Liberties Union Foundation honored the five defendants of the 1968 conspiracy trial, Dr. Spock included, at its annual Bill of Rights Dinner. In attendance was John Wall, who had prosecuted the government’s case twenty-five years earlier. Tight-lipped and remote during the trial, he was now genial, beaming as he introduced himself to me. “I read your book and I loved it.” He added, “When I saw Dr. Spock and the*

*others in person, and came to know them through their presence in the courtroom, I grew to admire their ethics and their courage in speaking out and being willing to go to jail—for life if necessary—to defend the principles our country is founded on. The [FBI] agents just didn't get that on the tapes."*

## APPENDIX

### DISCOVERING THE ESSAY CANON

#### *The Research Method and the Evidence*

Several years ago I casually asked, “What essays do people read today? And where do they read them?” The short answer to a lengthy five-year research process is this: those Americans who read essays at all find them reprinted in composition anthologies (a.k.a. readers) intended for freshman writing courses. Indeed, the twentieth-century American essay canon is unique among literary canons, for it is primarily a teaching canon rather than a critical canon. Thus it differs from the canons of poetry and fiction of any era, and even from that of nineteenth-century essays, in the way it is formed, transmitted, and changed. The poetry canon, for instance, as Golding (*From Outlaw to Classic*) and Rasula (*The American Poetry Wax Museum*) demonstrate, is created by an establishment of fellow poets who promote each other’s work. They publish each other’s poetry in the little magazines and poetry anthologies they edit; they award each other prizes in contests they judge, appoint each other to judging panels, elect each other to prestigious literary societies. They translate and comment on each other’s work, interview each other for publication, invite each other to give readings and to teach at writer’s workshops (Golding 70–110; Rasula 415–69). Novelists’ works—potentially far more lucrative than poetry—tend to be promoted initially by publishers, then by critics who, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith explains, judge, review, interpret, rank-order, evaluate and reevaluate them. The critics’ esteem has traditionally influenced professors, who then create a teaching canon by putting these authors on reading lists, teaching them in their courses, and including them in the literary anthologies they edit (42–53). However, while the teaching canon is but one way for fiction and poetry to become mainstream, it is the only venue for essays to become canonical in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

This has not always been the case. In the nineteenth century, the works of essayists such as Lamb, Ruskin, Carlyle, Mill, Arnold, Emerson, and Holmes arrived in the literary canon through the same cultural processes as novels and poetry—their admission enhanced by a reading

public that would “purchase, preserve, display, quote, cite, translate, perform” imitate, and discuss them (see Smith 42–43). But for a variety of reasons (see McQuade; Connors; Bloom, “Essay Canon”; Bloom, “Once More”), in the twentieth century the essay became relegated to a school genre, its status reduced to that of the unreal, unreasonable “five-paragraph theme.” At this turn of the millennium, despite the distinctive literary presence of essayistic critics such as Susan Sontag and William H. Gass, Americans have no tradition of buying single-authored collections of what they regard as *essays*. Sometimes such collections get reviewed, but except for the AWP and a few less prestigious creative nonfiction prizes, they are seldom the objects of promotion by other essayists, acknowledgment by critics, or extended treatment by biographers of the authors, such as Orwell (see Root). Thus although compilations of essays (on science, travel, sports, religion, food, and general subjects—sometimes regarded as *creative nonfiction*) are now being published, only the teaching canon ensures the endurance and widespread reading of essayists in our time. No matter where an essay first appeared—whether in the *New Yorker* or in a little magazine or on a newspaper’s op-ed page, if it is to survive in the hearts and minds of the reading public, it must be reprinted time after time in a textbook reader, where it has the chance to reach a significant number of America’s three million first-year college students. As Rasula observes: “Anthologies . . . are the steroids of canon-building” (481). Consequently, the authors of those essays that appear consistently in these readers become canonical.

To determine who were the canonical essayists, I decided to examine the most influential readers, reasoning that the most widely read authors would appear repeatedly in the most widely adopted collections—all books published in four or more editions over a fifty-year span, from the end of World War II to the present. These turned out to comprise fifty-eight titles published in 325 volumes, an 18.6% sample of the total number of readers published during this period, the most robust titles of the total number of 1,600-plus books that could be identified. A database of their complete tables of contents—21,000 items—includes some 4,300 essayists, the authors of the 9,000 titles reprinted. Of these, the works of only 175 authors have been reprinted more than 100 times, a scant 4% of the total number of authors but nearly half of the total reprints. These 175 authors—from Agee to Zinsser—are the canonical essayists. Note that because I’m using a sample approximating

20% of the total number of books available, the numbers in my published canon tables (Bloom, "Essay Canon" 426–28; Bloom, "Once More" 35) have to be multiplied by five to obtain a more exact estimate of the actual number of reprints. The figures I am citing here represent that multiplier.

All essays in a teaching canon, irrespective of authorial presence or voice, need to have the following characteristics that make them teachable. The essay needs to be *intellectually appropriate* for the course, in this case first-year composition (a.k.a. Freshman English). It has to fit the subject(s), level of difficulty, and orientation—social, political, philosophical—to reading and learning the course promotes, without being so immediately topical that it will quickly go out of date. It has to appeal to the teacher, for overt good reasons (is it intellectually challenging? aesthetically engaging?) and covert bad ones (can it stimulate a good discussion even if the teacher hasn't read it beforehand?). It has to be reasonably accessible to the students, with or without a lot of explanation in class.

In addition, a canonical essay must exemplify various *formal features*. It must either be short enough (usually under 5,000 words) to be discussed in one or two class periods or capable of being excerpted without undue violence to attain that length. A canonical essay should be well written, a good model of organization, style, and vocabulary as well as of one or more rhetorical modes, such as argument or description; the more versatile essays exemplify a multitude of rhetorical and stylistic techniques, as we have seen in the case of "Once More to the Lake." Additional influences on canonicity include the *author's reputation* (a plus) and the essay's *cost* (a potential minus to canonical status because every popular—and therefore pricey—author erodes an editor's royalties; unknown writers are much cheaper).