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Two Marriages

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*Being with Children: A High-Spirited Personal Account of Teaching Writing,
Theater, and Videotape*

PHILLIP LOPATE

TO SHOW AND
TO TELL

The Craft of Literary Nonfiction



FREE PRESS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi



Free Press
A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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First Free Press trade paperback edition February 2013

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Book design by Ellen R. Sasahara

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lopate, Phillip.

To show and to tell : the craft of literary nonfiction / by Phillip Lopate. — 1st Free Press trade paperback ed. p. cm.

1. Creative nonfiction—Authorship.
 2. Autobiography—Authorship.
 3. Essay—Authorship.
 4. Prose literature—Authorship. I. Title.
- PN145.L67 2013
808.02—dc23
2012025669

ISBN: 978-1-4516-9632-5
ISBN: 978-1-4516-9633-2 (ebook)

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We also need to recognize that some of our best recent writers were arguably better at nonfiction than fiction. Though they usually preferred to think of themselves as novelists, none of them ever created a character as vibrant as his/her nonfiction narrator, be it Mary McCarthy, George Orwell, James Baldwin, Gore Vidal, Norman Mailer ("Aquarius"), Susan Sontag, or Joan Didion. So nonfiction has nothing to apologize for. It can hold its head up high.

On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character

In personal essays and memoir, nothing is more commonly met than the letter *I*. I think it is a perfectly good word, one no writer should be ashamed to use. First person is especially legitimate for personal writing, so drawn to the particulars of character and voice. The problem with *I* is not that it is in bad taste (as college composition courses used to teach), but that fledgling autobiographical writers may think they've said or conveyed more than they actually have with that one syllable. In their minds, that *I* may be swimming with background and a lush, sticky past and an almost too fatal specificity, whereas the reader encountering it for the first time in a new piece sees only a slender telephone pole standing in the sentence, trying to catch a few signals to send on. In truth, even the barest *I* holds a whisper of promised engagement and can suggest a caress in the midst of more stolid language. What it doesn't do, however, is give us a clear picture of who is speaking.

To do that, the writer needs to build herself into a character. And I use the word *character* much the same way the fiction

writer does. E. M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*, drew a famous distinction between "flat" and "round" characters—between those fictional personages seen from the outside who acted with the predictable consistency of Dickensian caricatures, and those whose Woolfian complexities or teeming inner lives we came to know. James Wood has argued that Stephen Greenblatt's distinction between "transparent" and "opaque" characters is more helpful than Forster's. But whether the writer chooses to present characters as flat, round, transparent, opaque, or a combination of these, the people on the page—it scarcely matters whether they appear in fiction or nonfiction—will need to become knowable enough in their broad outlines to behave plausibly, and at the same time free-willed enough to intrigue us with surprises. The art of characterization comes down to establishing a pattern of habits and actions for the person you are writing about and introducing variations into the system. In this respect, building a character is a pedagogic model, because you are teaching the reader what to expect.

So how do you turn *yourself* into a character? First of all, you need to have—or acquire—some distance from yourself. If you are so panicked by any examination of your flaws that all you can do is sputter defensively when you feel yourself attacked, you are not going to get very far in the writing of personal essays. You need to be able to see yourself from the ceiling: to know, for instance, how you are coming across in social situations, and to assess accurately when you are being charming and when you seem pushy, mousy, or ridiculous. From the viewpoint of honest personal writing, it is just as unsatisfactory or distorting to under-rate yourself all the time and claim you are far less effective than you actually are, than to give yourself too much credit. The point is to begin to take inventory of yourself so that you can present that self to the reader as a specific, legible character.

A good place to start is your quirks. These are the idiosyncrasies, stubborn tics, antisocial mannerisms, and so on that set you apart from the majority. There will be more than enough time later to assert your common humanity, or better yet, to let the reader make the mental bridge between your oddities and those of everyone else. But to establish credibility, you would do well to resist coming across as absolutely average. Who wants to read about that bland creature, the regular Joe? The mistake many would-be essayists and memoirists make is to try so hard to be likable and nice, to fit in, that the reader, bored, begins craving stronger stuff (at the very least, a tone of authority). Literature is not a place for conformists and organization men. The skills of the kaffeeklatsch—restraining one's expressiveness, rounding out one's edges, sparing everyone's feelings—will not work as well on the page, if your goal is to create a memorable and compelling narrator.

The irony is that most of us suspect—no, we *know*—that underneath it all we *are* common as dirt. But we may still need to maximize that pitiful set of quirks, those small differences that seem to set us apart from others, and project them theatrically, the way actors work with singularities in their physical appearance or vocal texture. In order to turn ourselves into characters, we need to *dramatize* ourselves. I don't mean inventing or adding colorful traits that aren't truly ours; I mean positioning those that are already in us under the most clearly focused, sharply defined light. It's a subtractive process: you need to cut away the inessentials and highlight just those features in your personality that most quickly characterize you, preferably those that lead to the most intense contradictions and ambivalences.

A piece of personal writing needs conflict, just as a short story does. Without conflict, your personal essay or memoir will drift into static mode, repeating your initial observation, and will come across as self-satisfied. What gives personal writing dynamism

is the need to work out some problem, especially a problem that is not easily resolved. Fortunately, human beings are conflicted animals, so there is no shortage of tensions governing our lives. Experienced personal essayists know how to select a topic in advance that will generate enough spark in itself, and how to frame the topic so that it will be neither too ambitious nor too slight—so that its scale is appropriate for satisfactory exploration. If you are serenely unconflicted when you first sit down to write, you may find yourself running out of steam. If you take on a problem that is too philosophically large or historically convoluted, you may choke on the details and give up.

Still, these are technical matters, and I am inclined to think that what stands in the way of most personal writing is not technique but psychology: what's needed is the emotional preparedness and the generosity, if you will, to be honest and open to exposure.

The fledgling personal writer may be torn between two contrasting extremes:

- a. "I am so weird that I could never tell on the page what is really secretly going on in my mind."
- b. "I am so boring, nothing ever happens to me out of the ordinary, so who would want to read about me?"

Both extremes are rooted in shame, and both reflect a lack of worldliness. The first response ("I am so weird") exaggerates how isolated one is in those "wicked, wicked thoughts of mine," to quote Nietzsche, instead of recognizing that everyone has strange, surreal, or immoral notions. The second response ("My life is so boring and I'm so boring") requires a reeducation so that one can be brought to acknowledge just those moments in the day, in our loves and friendships, in our family dynamics, in our historical epoch, in our interactions with the natural world,

that remain genuinely perplexing, vexing, uncanny, luminous, unresolved. In short, one must be nudged to recognize that life remains a mystery—even one's own so-called boring life. There must also be some recognition of the charm of ordinary daily existence, which has nourished some of the most enduring non-fiction.

The use of literary models can be a great help in invoking life's mystery. I like to remind myself, as well as my students, of the tonal extremes available: we can rant as much as Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* or Céline's or Bernhard's narrators, we can speak (as the poet Mayakovsky says) "At the Top of My Voice," we can be as passionate and partisan as Hazlitt or Baldwin, or even whine, the way Joan Didion sometimes does, with self-aware humor. We can try to adopt the sane, thoughtful, responsible manner of George Orwell or E. B. White. From all these models a writer of personal narrative can then choose how measured or feverish she wants to come across at any time: in one piece, she can sound like the soul of reason; in another, a step away from the loony bin.

Mining our quirks is only the beginning of turning ourselves into characters. We are distinguished one from the other as much by our past conditions, the set of circumstances in our backgrounds, as by the challenges we have encountered along the way. It means something very different to have been the second-oldest boy in an upper-middle-class Korean family that emigrated from Seoul to Los Angeles than to have been born the youngest female in a poor Southern Baptist household of nine.

Ethnicity, gender, religion, social class, geography, political affiliation: these are all strong determinants in the development of character. Sometimes they can be made too much of, as in the more limiting sort of identity politics, which seeks to explain all the intangibles of a human being's destiny by this or that social

oppression. But we must be bold in working with these categories as starting points and not be afraid to meditate on our membership in each of these communities, and the degree to which it has—or has not—formed us.

When you are writing a memoir, you can set up these categories and assess their importance one by one and go on from there. When you write personal essays, you can never assume that your readers will know a thing about your background, regardless of how many times you have explained it in previous essays. So you must become deft at inserting that information swiftly—I might say, “I was born in Brooklyn, New York, of working-class parents”—and not worry about the fact that it may be redundant to your regular readers, if you’re lucky enough to have any. In one essay you may make a big thing of your regional background and very little of your religious training; in another, just the opposite, but in each essay it would be a good idea to tell the reader both, simply because this sort of information will help to build you into a character.

In this sense, the personal writer must be like a journalist, who respects the obligation to get in the basic orienting facts—who, what, where, when, and why—as close to the top of every story as possible.

So now you have sketched yourself to the reader as a person of a certain age, sex, ethnic and religious background, class or region, possessing a set of quirks, foibles, strengths, and peculiarities. Are you yet a character? Maybe not: not until you have soldered your relationship with the reader by springing vividly into his mind, so that everything your I says and does on the page seems somehow oddly, piquantly characteristic. The reader must find you amusing—that’s the crux of it—amusing enough to follow you, no matter what topic you propose. Whether you are writing this time about world peace or a piece of chalk, readers

must sense quickly from the first paragraph that you are going to keep them engaged. The trick, of course, is that you cannot amuse the reader unless you are already self-amused. And here we come to one of the main stumbling blocks placed before effective personal writing: self-hatred.

It is an observable fact that most people don’t like themselves, in spite of being decent-enough human beings—certainly not war criminals—and in spite of the many self-help books urging us to befriend and think positively about ourselves. Why this self-dislike should be so prevalent I cannot pretend to understand; all I can say, from my vantage point as a teacher and anthologist of the personal essay, is that an odor of self-disgust mars many performances in this genre and keeps many would-be personal writers from developing into full-fledged professionals. They exhibit a form of stuttering, of never being able to get past the initial, superficial self-presentation and diving into the wreck of personality with gusto.

The proper alternative to self-dislike is not being pleased with oneself—a smug complacency that comes across as equally distasteful—but being *curious* about oneself. Such self-curiosity (of which Montaigne was the fountainhead and greatest exemplar) can only grow out of that detachment or distance from oneself about which I spoke earlier. I am convinced that self-amusement is a discipline that can be learned; it can be practiced even by people such as myself, who have at times a strong self-mistrust. I may be very tired of myself in everyday life, but once I start narrating a situation or set of ideas on the page, I begin to see my I in a comic light, and I maneuver him so that he will best amuse the reader. Maintaining one’s dignity should not be a paramount issue in personal writing. But first must come the urge to entertain or at least provocatively stimulate the reader. From that impulse everything else follows.

There is also considerable character dimensionality to be derived from expressing your opinions, prejudices, half-baked ideas, etc., provided you are willing to analyze the flaws in your thinking and to consider arguments against your fixations and not be too solemn about it all. Nonfiction writing thrives on daring, darting, subjective flights of thought. You must get in the habit of inviting, not censoring, the most far-fetched, mischievous notions, because even if they prove cockeyed, they may point to an element of truth that would otherwise be inaccessible.

Finally, personal nonfiction writers would do well to follow another rule of fiction writers, who tell you that if you want to reveal someone's character, actions speak louder than words. Give your protagonist, your I-character, something to do. It's fine to be privy to all of I's ruminations and cerebral nuances, but consciousness can only take us so far in the illumination of character. Particularly if you are writing a memoir piece, with chronology and narrative, it is often liberating to have the I-character step beyond the observer role and be implicated crucially in the overall action. How many memoirs suffer from a self-righteous setup: the writer telling a story in which Mr. or Ms. I is the passive recipient of the world's cruelty or is exposed to racism or betrayal, say. There is something off-putting about a nonfiction story in which the I is infinitely more sinned against than sinning. By showing our complicity in the world's stock of sorrow, we convince the reader of our reality and even gain his sympathy.

How much more complicated and believable is George Orwell's investigative left-wing self, the I in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, for having admitted he found the coal miners' smells repellent, or James Baldwin's I in *Notes of a Native Son*, for acknowledging how close he came to the edge with his rages against racism in restaurants! Character is not just a question of sensibility. There are hard choices to be made when a person is put under pressure, and

it is in having made the wrong choice, curiously enough, that we are made all the more aware of our free will and humanity. So it is that remorse is often the starting point for good personal writing, whose working out brings the necessary self-forgiveness (not to mention self-amusement) that is necessary to help us outgrow shame.

I have not touched on some other requirements of good personal writing, such as the need to go beyond the self's quandaries, through research or contextualization, to bring back news of the larger world. Nor have I spoken of the grandeur of the impersonal, formal essay. Yet even when the word *I* plays no part in the language of criticism or other nonfiction, a firm sense of personality can warm the voice of the impersonal narrator. When we read a Samuel Johnson or Edmund Wilson or Lionel Trilling or Susan Sontag essay, for instance, we feel that we know these authors as fully developed characters (prickly, tolerant, combative, judicious), regardless of their not having referred personally to themselves at all in those pages.

The need thus exists to make oneself into a character, whether the nonfiction uses a first- or third-person narrative voice. I would further maintain that this process of turning oneself into a character is not self-absorbed navel gazing, but rather a potential *release* from narcissism. It means you have achieved sufficient distance to begin to see yourself in the round: a necessary precondition to transcending the ego—or at least writing personal nonfiction that can touch other people.

Research and Personal Writing

Those drawn to the writing of personal essays and memoirs are apt to discover the necessity to do some research. Sooner or later you run out of traumas and triumphs to recount; you have chewed up the tastiest limbs of your life story, and research becomes an alternative to further self-cannibalization. Even before that day arrives, you may find your memory can only take you so far: you need to go back to the old neighborhood and walk around, or talk to old-timers, or read up on local history, or pore through genealogical archives, housing deeds, census records.

There are other pluses to research, besides filling in the narrative gaps of autobiographical recollection with missing factual details. It can also bring a more general significance to your personal story. Research inspires curiosity, helps you break out of claustrophobic self-absorption and come to understand that you are not the only one who has passed down this road. You begin to see your experience as part of a larger pattern, be it sociological, historical, psychological, anthropological, cultural, political, or theological: these lenses can supply useful new perspectives to your private tale.

Let us say that you grew up in a relatively new suburb. It might not be a bad idea to examine what factors in American society fueled the postwar growth of suburbia: the Federal Highway Act, FHA loans, the utopian ethos of planned decentralization, the decay of urban downtowns, racism, white flight, and so on. (This is pretty much the approach that D. J. Waldie took in his *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir*.) Or you witnessed your parents going through an ugly divorce: what insights can be gleaned from the writings of child psychiatrists about the ways that children adapt, or don't, to such situations? Or your parents were immigrants who spoke a language other than English at home, and you grew up torn between two cultures: what do anthropologists say about this problem? What do novelists and memoirists say about it? Or your father was a rocket engineer in the space program: how much astrophysics will it be necessary to learn and convey to the lay reader in order to put together a convincing account, as M. G. Lord did in *Astro Turf: The Private Life of Rocket Science*?

You may begin researching some technical field to provide a stronger answer to the question "Why should my little story count?"—and end up more interested in the area under study than in your personal narrative. You may find you are using your I-character more as a guide to help the reader through abstruse material than as the central focus. In other words, the proportion between self and world may shift in the process of researching. Or you may end up throwing out most of the research and just using a little bit as a spice to vary the prose palate. In most cases, however, research will assist you in conceptualizing more broadly the questions you would like to put to your experience.

Travel literature is one such area where the two approaches comfortably merge. The best travel writers, such as Robert Byron, Patrick Leigh Fermor, Ryszard Kapuscinski, Bruce Chatwin, or Kate Simon, employ their I-character to fetch adventures that

can then be juicily related, while also doing extensive research on the countries through which they are traveling. Consider this passage from Chatwin's *In Patagonia*, and the way it weaves together personal experience and historical information:

I left the Rio Negro and went on south to Port Madryn.

A hundred and fifty-three Welsh colonists landed here off the brig *Mimosa* in 1863. They were poor people in search of a New Wales, refugees from cramped coal-mining valleys, from a failed Independence movement, and from Parliament's ban on Welsh in schools. Their leaders had combed the earth for a stretch of open country uncontaminated by Englishmen. They chose Patagonia for its absolute remoteness and foul climate; they did not want to get rich.

The Argentine Government gave them land along the Chubut River. From Madryn it was a march of forty mules over the thorn desert. And when they did reach the valley, they had the impression that God, and not the Government, had given them the land. Port Madryn was a town of shabby concrete buildings, tin bungalows, tin warehouses and a wind-flattened garden. There was a cemetery of black cypresses and shiny black marble tombstones. The Calle Saint-Exupery was a reminder that the storm in *Vol de Nuit* was somewhere in these parts.

I walked along the esplanade and looked out at the even line of cliffs spreading round the bay. The cliffs were a lighter grey than the grey of the sea and sky. The beach was grey and littered with dead penguins. Halfway along was a concrete monument in memory of the Welsh. It looked like the entrance to a bunker. Set into its sides were bronze reliefs representing Barbarism and Civilization.

Barbarism showed a group of Teheulche Indians, naked, with slabby back muscles in the Soviet style. The Welsh were on the side of Civilization—greybeards, young men with scythes, and big-breasted girls with babies.

Essayists and memoirists who are already scientists or doctors have an advantage over the rest of us, in that they can convey the wisdom and knowledge derived from their research with an easy authority. Hence, the appeal of such graceful literary savants as Loren Eiseley, Oliver Sacks, Stephen Jay Gould, Richard Selzer, and Lewis Thomas. In my next lifetime I hope to be a scientific scholar, but in the meantime, I give myself research assignments, sneaking off to the stacks whenever possible.

I was asked to contribute a personal essay for an anthology about the Book of Genesis, by picking a Bible story and ruminating on it. I chose to write about a pair of incidents when Abraham, fearing for his life when approaching the border of a potentially hostile people, passes off his wife Sarah as his sister. I could have stayed home and merely reflected on it, but instead I rushed off to the library to learn how the medieval rabbis and midrash writers and modern biblical scholars interpreted this seemingly cowardly act by a patriarch. What I discovered (some rationalized his act, others disapproved) formed the basis of the first part of my essay. Then I researched what Sigmund Freud and Karen Horney had to say about married couples devolving into sibling-like pairs, and that became the second panel. Finally I told the story of an incident that had occurred during my first marriage, when my wife and I were traveling through Morocco. The idea was that the personal vignette, which would have been inconclusive if recounted alone, would be enriched by the earlier perspectives provided by Rambam, Adin Steinsaltz, Freud, and Horney. I was looking to apply, through research, other lenses to my memoirist musings.

The main concern that students and emerging writers have about the research process is how to know when to stop. You begin poking around a complex new field—say, wine or rugs or nongovernment organizations in Africa—about which you know next to nothing; you realize that you could spend the rest of your life studying it; and you quickly become overwhelmed with its ever-expanding ramifications and think of giving up. Believe me, it does narrow eventually. After a few weeks at the library, on the Internet, or in the field, you notice that the sources are telling you something you already know, and you grasp the major schools of thought, their differences of opinion. Here the creative nonfiction writer can follow the journalists' lead. Being trained generalists—that is to say, quick studies who can leap opportunistically on intriguing vignettes and facts, give them a vivid twist, and forget the rest—veteran journalists know that they don't have to become specialists, they just have to absorb enough of the material under scrutiny this week or month to file an interesting story. When you are researching, what you are looking for, subconsciously or not, is the oddity that will spark your imagination—not necessarily the most important detail, but the one that will excite your love of paradox or sense of humor.

There comes a time when you feel you have done enough research for your modest purposes and can begin to write. Now you face a new dilemma: how to integrate the scholarly materials you have uncovered into your characteristic prose style? When I was writing *Waterfront*, I had to investigate a number of complex subjects, such as bridge engineering, marine biology, the anatomy of shipworms, public housing law. Each time I researched some new area, I was so impressed, so awed by the specialists' expertise, that I had a tendency to overquote them. I would think to myself, They know everything, I know nothing, how can I pretend to explain it when their language is so persuasive? This led

to long, boring extracts, which my editor convinced me would have to go. I needed to paraphrase them somehow, put them in my own words, warm them with my stylistic breath. To convert this obdurate magma into something that sounded relatively essayistic, intimate, conversational, I had to call on every trick, irony, and witticism I could muster. At one point it meant lamprooning the tone of a pedantic biologist; at another, playing up in a self-deprecating way my ignorance. I gave myself the challenge of writing the heroic but too-familiar saga of the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge in one long, Jamesian, convoluted sentence. I speeded up the geological cycle of the Ice Age like a silent comedy. No one commented on these devices, or perhaps even noticed them, but they helped reassure me I had put a personal stamp on this technical matter.

One of the best parts about researching is that it inspires in you an obligation to finish your writing project, if only to serve faithfully the scholarly materials to which you have become so attached. It is no longer all about *you*, but about them too, as though they had somehow become your offspring when you weren't watching. "Print me, Papa," beseech those index cards, those notepads, those Post-its.

book at Free Press, reuniting me with estimable publisher Martha Levin. I've been blessed with a very skillful, shrewd, sympathetic editor, Millicent Bennett, and her able assistant, Chloe Perkins.

As always, I tested early versions of these pieces on friends and colleagues—Robert and Peg Boyers, Vivian Gornick, Patricia Hampl, Lis Harris, Margo Jefferson, Allison Jones, David Lazar, Richard Locke, Honor Moore, Patricia O'Toole, Scott Russell Sanders, Vijay Seshadri, Michael Steinberg, and Mark Street—who were kind enough to respond with a blend of diplomacy and honesty.

Finally, a big thank-you to my wife, Cheryl, and daughter, Lily, for their love, good humor, and forbearance.

Reading List



What follows is a list of suggested readings: very roughly speaking, a canon. Though it may appear dauntingly long at first, it is by no means all-inclusive, nor is it meant to be. What it does reflect, perhaps to a fault, is my own reading in and intuitions about the field of nonfiction. I am well aware that there are many gaps as well as debatable inclusions below. But I offer the list as a starting point; others can fine-tune it to their taste. Its main purpose is to convey the richness, variety, and depth of literary nonfiction. For those who are confused about what can or cannot be done in this genre, and how to do it (which means practically everyone), I would submit that the answers reside less in prescriptive tips and how-to manuals than in immersive reading. If you are writing a memoir, for instance, you do not have to reinvent the wheel. There are precedents galore that can both instruct and empower. Nor is it necessary or advisable to restrict your reading to autobiographies, personal essays, and whatever passes for creative nonfiction: once you have grasped that there are wonderful prose writers in every field under the sun—articulate, expressive, cultivated practitioners—you can better figure out how to expand your focus from the personal to the world-embracing.

Some Classic Autobiographies and Memoirs (Pre-Twentieth Century)

- Saint Augustine: *Confessions*
 Benvenuto Cellini: *Autobiography*
 Jacques Casanova: *Memoirs*
 Duc de Saint-Simon: *Memoirs*
 Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle: *Memoirs, Life of the Duke*
 Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Confessions*
 Benjamin Franklin: *Autobiography*
 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Autobiography* ("Poetry and Truth")
 François-René Chateaubriand: *Mémoires d'outre tombe*
 Stendhal: *Memoirs of an Egotist* and *The Life of Henri Brulard*
 John Stuart Mill: *Autobiography*
 Frederick Douglass: *Autobiography*
 Henry David Thoreau: *Walden*
 Harriet Jacobs: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave-Girl*
 Thomas De Quincey: *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*
 John Ruskin: *Praeterita*
 Alexander Herzen: *My Past and Thoughts*
 Edmund Gosse: *Father and Son*
 Daniel Paul Schreber: *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*
 Ulysses S. Grant: *Memoirs*

Some Early Twentieth-century Memoirs

- Henry Adams: *The Education of Henry Adams*
 Virginia Woolf: "A Sketch of the Past" (in *Moments of Being*)
 Richard Wright: *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*
 André Gide: *If It Die* and *Madeleine*
 W. E. B. Du Bois: *The Autobiography*
 Frank Harris: *My Life and Loves*

- H. G. Wells: *Experiment in Autobiography*
 T. E. Lawrence: *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*
 Agnes Smedley: *Daughter of Earth*
 Henri Michaux: *Miserable Miracle*
 H. L. Mencken: *Happy Days, Newspaper Days, Heathen Days*
 Leon Trotsky: *Autobiography*
 Mohandas K. Gandhi: *Autobiography*
 Mikhail Zoshchenko: *Before Sunrise*
 Robert Graves: *Goodbye to All That*
 Victor Serge: *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*

Some Postwar Twentieth-century Memoirs

- Nirad Chaudhuri: *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*
 Mary McCarthy: *Memoirs of a Catholic Girlhood*
 Vladimir Nabokov: *Speak, Memory*
 Edward Dahlberg: *Because I Was Flesh*
 J. R. Ackerley: *My Father and Myself* and *My Dog Tulip*
 Jean-Paul Sartre: *The Words*
 Nadezhda Mandelstam: *Hope against Hope*
 Primo Levi: *Survival in Auschwitz, The Reawakening*
 Carlos Levi: *Christ Stopped at Eboli*
 Ernst Junger: *The Storm of Steel*
 Natalia Ginzburg: *Family Sayings*
 Storm Jameson: *Journey from the North*
 Malcolm X: *The Autobiography*
 Frederick Exley: *A Fan's Notes*
 Christopher Isherwood: *Christopher and His Kind, My Guru and His Disciple*
 Czeslaw Milosz: *Native Realm*
 Victor Shklovsky: *A Sentimental Journey, Third Factory*
 Thomas Bernhard: *The Cause, The Cellar, The Breath* (3 vol. autobiography)

V. S. Pritchett: *A Cab at the Door*
 Elias Canetti: *The Tongue Set Free, The Torch in My Ear, The Play of the Eyes*
 Konstantin Paustovsky: *The Story of a Life*
 Boris Pasternak: *Safe Conduct, I Remember*
 C. G. Jung: *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*
 Kate Simon: *Bronx Primitive*
 Lewis Mumford: *Sketches from Life*
 Loren Eiseley: *All the Strange Hours*
 Thomas Merton: *The Seven-Storey Mountain*
 Colette: *My Mother's House*
 Michel Leiris: *Manhood, Rules of the Game*
 Geoffrey Wolff: *The Duke of Deception*
 Hilary Masters: *Last Stands*
 Frank Conroy: *Stop-Time*
 Peter Handke: *A Sorrow beyond Dreams*
 John Updike: *Self-Consciousness*
 Anatole Broyard: *Kafka Was the Rage, Intoxicated by My Illness*
 V. S. Naipaul: "Prologue to an Autobiography," *The Enigma of Arrival*
 Chester Himes: *The Quality of Hurt*
 Luis Buñuel: *My Last Sigh*
 Elia Kazan: *A Life*
 Sylvia Ashton-Warner: *Teacher*
 Nelson Mandela: *Long Walk to Freedom*
 Gregor von Rezzori: *The Snows of Yesteryear*

Recent Memoirs

Philip Roth: *Patrimony*
 Vivian Gornick: *Fierce Attachments*
 Richard Rodriguez: *Hunger for Memory*
 Lucy Grealy: *Autobiography of a Face*
 Joanne Beard: *The Boys of My Youth*

Mary Karr: *The Liar's Club*
 Frank McCourt: *Angela's Ashes, Teacher Man*
 Dave Eggers: *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*
 Doris Lessing: *Under My Skin, Walking in the Shade*
 Amos Oz: *A Tale of Love and Darkness*
 Art Spiegelman: *Maus*
 Marjane Satrapi: *Persepolis 1 and 2*
 David Shields: *Remote*
 Emily Fox Gordon: *Mockingbird Years*
 Lorna Sage: *Bad Blood*
 Spalding Gray: *Swimming to Cambodia*
 Jill Ker-Conway: *The Road from Corrain*
 Elizabeth Kendall: *American Daughter*
 J. M. Coetzee: *Boyhood, Youth*
 Geoff Dyer: *Out of Sheer Rage*
 Paula Fox: *Borrowed Finery*
 James Salter: *Burning the Days*
 Edmund de Waal: *The Hare with Amber Eyes*
 Paul Auster: *The Invention of Solitude, Winter Journal*
 Alison Bechdel: *Fun Home*

Some Classic Essayists

Seneca: *Letters from a Stoic*
 Plutarch: *Selected Essays on Love, the Family and the Good Life*
 Cicero: *Selected Works, On the Good Life*
 Michel de Montaigne: *Complete Essays*
 Francis Bacon: *Essays*
 Abraham Cowley: *Essays, Plays and Sundry Verses*
 Samuel Johnson: *Essays from The Rambler, The Idler, The Adventurer*
 Joseph Addison and Richard Steele: *The Tatler and the Spectator*
 Charles Lamb: *Essays of Elia and The Last Essays of Elia*

William Hazlitt: *Selected Essays*
 Leigh Hunt: *Essays, Autobiography*
 Thomas De Quincey: *Selected Essays*
 Charles Dickens: *Sketches from Boz*
 Ralph Waldo Emerson: *Essays*
 Robert Louis Stevenson: *The Lantern Bearers and Other Essays*
 Oscar Wilde: *De Profundis, Selected Essays*
 Matthew Arnold: *Culture and Anarchy*
 Walter Pater: *The Renaissance, Appreciations*
 Thomas Carlyle: *Sartor Resartus*, "On Heroes and Hero-Worship"
 Oliver Wendell Holmes: *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*

Some Twentieth-century Essayists

Max Beerbohm: *Selected Prose*
 G. K. Chesterton: *Tremendous Trifles*
 Hilaire Belloc: *On Nothing, On Everything, On Anything, On Something*
 Virginia Woolf: *Collected Essays, The Death of the Moth*
 George Orwell: *Collected Essays*
 James Baldwin: *Collected Essays, Notes of a Native Son, The Fire Next Time*
 Robert Benchley: *The Benchley Roundup*
 James Thurber: *Writings and Drawings*
 H. L. Mencken: *A Mencken Chrestomathy, Prejudices* (vols. 1–6)
 S. J. Perelman: *The Best of S. J. Perelman*
 F. Scott Fitzgerald: *The Crack-Up*
 A. J. Liebling: *Just Enough Liebling*
 Walter Benjamin: *Illuminations, Reflections*
 Susan Sontag: *Against Interpretation, Under the Sign of Saturn*
 E. B. White: *Selected Essays*
 C. L. R. James: *The C. L. R. James Reader*
 Seymour Krim: *What Is This Cat's Story?*

Jorge Luis Borges: *Collected Non-Fictions*
 Czeslaw Milosz: *To Begin Again*
 M. F. K. Fisher: *The Gastronomical Me, The Art of Eating*
 Osamu Dazai: *Self Portraits*
 Natalia Ginzburg: *The Little Virtues, A Place to Live*
 Roland Barthes: *Mythologies, Barthes on Barthes*
 Hubert Butler: *Independent Spirit*
 Joseph Brodsky: *Less Than One*
 Guy Davenport: *The Geography of the Imagination, The Hunter Gracchus*
 Gore Vidal: *United States: Essays 1952–1992*

Some Contemporary Essayists (Personal, Familiar, and Humorist)

Joan Didion: *Slouching toward Bethlehem, The White Album*
 Edward Hoagland: *Heart's Desire, Sex and the River Styx*
 Annie Dillard: *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek, Teaching a Stone to Talk*
 Joseph Epstein: *The Middle of My Tether*
 Adrienne Rich: *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*
 Vivian Gornick: *Approaching Eye Level, The Situation and the Story*
 William Gass: *On Being Blue*
 Phillip Lopate: *Getting Personal, Notes on Sontag*
 Nancy Mairs: *Plaintext, Waist-High in the World*
 Scott Russell Sanders: *The Paradise of Bombs*
 Gerald Early: *Tuxedo Junction*
 Daniel Harris: *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*
 Anne Fadiman: *Ex Libris*
 David Sedaris: *Naked*
 Sara Suleri: *Meatless Days*
 Lynn Freed: *Reading, Writing, and Leaving Home*
 Jonathan Lethem: *The Disappointment Artist*
 John D'Agata: *Halls of Fame, The Lost Origins of the Essay*

Emily Fox Gordon: *Book of Days*
 Lia Purpura: *Rough Likeness*
 Eula Biss: *Notes from No Man's Land*
 Siri Hustvedt: *Living, Thinking, Looking*

Nature, Science, Medicine, and the Environment

Richard Jeffries: *The Life of the Fields*
 J. Henri Fabre: *Fabre's Book of Insects*
 John Muir: *The Mountains of California*
 Charles Darwin: *The Voyage of the Beagle, On the Origin of Species*
 William Bartram: *Travels and Other Writings*
 John James Audubon: *Writings and Drawings*
 John Burroughs: *Birch Browsings*
 Aldo Leopold: *Sand County Almanac*
 Henry Beston: *The Outermost House*
 Edward Abbey: *Desert Solitaire*
 Loren Eiseley: *The Immense Journey, The Night Country*
 Stephen Jay Gould: *The Panda's Thumb*
 Lewis Thomas: *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher*
 F. González-Crussi: *Notes of an Anatomist*
 Oliver Sacks: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, An Anthropologist on Mars*
 A. R. Luria: *The Mind of a Mnemonist, The Man with a Shattered World*
 Richard Selzer: *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*
 Gretel Ehrlich: *The Solace of Open Spaces*
 John McPhee: *Coming into the Country*
 Peter Matthiessen: *The Snow Leopard*
 Wendell Berry: *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*
 Edward Hoagland: *Hoagland on Nature*
 Barry Lopez: *Arctic Dreams*
 Michael Pollan: *Second Nature, The Botany of Desire*

Psychology

Sigmund Freud: *The Wolf Man, Dora, Civilization and Its Discontents*
 D. W. Winnicott: *Winnicott on the Child, Playing and Reality*
 Karen Horney: *Feminine Psychology*
 Leslie H. Farber: *The Ways of the Will*
 Adam Phillips: *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*
 Jules Henry: *Pathways to Madness*

Architecture and Landscape

Lewis Mumford: *Sidewalk Critic, The Lewis Mumford Reader*
 Ada Louise Huxtable: *On Architecture*
 Jane Jacobs: *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*
 J. B. Jackson: *Landscape in Sight*
 William H. Whyte: *The Essential William H. Whyte*
 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour: *Learning from Las Vegas*

Dance

Edwin Denby: *Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets*
 Arlene Croce: *Croce on Dance, The Fred and Ginger Book*
 Elizabeth Kendall: *Where She Danced*

Art

Denis Diderot: *Diderot on Art*
 John Ruskin: *The Stones of Venice*
 Harold Rosenberg: *Discovering the Present*
 Clement Greenberg: *Collected Essays and Criticism*
 Meyer Schapiro: *Impressionism, Modern Art*
 Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings*

John Berger: *Ways of Seeing, Selected Essays*
 Robert Hughes: *Nothing If Not Critical*

Sports

Red Smith: *The Red Smith Reader, To Absent Friends*
 A. J. Liebling: *The Sweet Science*
 Roger Angell: *The Summer Game, Five Seasons*
 Gay Talese: *The Silent Season of a Hero*

Literary Criticism and Appreciation

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *Biographia Literaria*
 Virginia Woolf: *The Common Reader*
 D. H. Lawrence: *Studies in American Literature*
 W. H. Auden: *The Dyer's Hand, Forewords and Afterwords*
 John Berryman: *The Freedom of the Poet*
 Randall Jarrell: *The First [Second, Third] Book of Criticism*
 Alfred Kazin: *On Native Grounds*
 Cynthia Ozick: *Art and Ardor, Quarrel & Quandary*
 Edmund Wilson: *Axel's Castle, The Shores of Light, Patriotic Gore*
 Lionel Trilling: *The Liberal Imagination, The Opposing Self*
 Elizabeth Hardwick: *Bartleby in Manhattan and Other Essays*
 David Shields: *Reality Hunger*
 Geoff Dyer: *Out of Sheer Rage*
 Lynne Sharon Schwartz: *Ruined by Reading*
 Patricia Hampl: *I Could Tell You Stories*

Film

Otis Ferguson: *The Film Criticism of Otis Ferguson*
 James Agee: *Agee on Film*
 Manny Farber: *Negative Space*
 Robert Warshow: *The Immediate Experience*

André Bazin: *What Is Cinema?* vols. 1-2
 Parker Tyler: *Screening the Sexes, Magic and Myth in the Movies*
 Pauline Kael: *For Keeps*
 Andrew Sarris: *Confessions of a Cultist, Politics and Cinema*
 Stanley Cavell: *Pursuits of Happiness*

Music and Drama

William Hazlitt: *Hazlitt on Theatre*
 George Bernard Shaw: *Music in London, Our Theatres in the Nineties*
 Hector Berlioz: *Evenings with the Orchestra*
 Max Beerbohm: *Around Theatres*
 Wayne Koestenbaum: *The Queen's Throat*
 Margo Jefferson: *On Michael Jackson*
 John Jeremiah Johnson: *Pulphead*
 Charles Rosen: *The Classical Style, The Romantic Generation*

Political and Social Writing

Niccolò Machiavelli: *The Prince*
 Mary Wollstonecraft: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*
 Edmund Burke: *On Empire, Liberty, and Reform*
 Alexis de Tocqueville: *Democracy in America*
 William Cobbett: *Rural Rides*
 Karl Marx: *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*
 Rebecca West: *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*
 Antonio Gramsci: *Letters from Prison*
 George Orwell: *The Road to Wigan Pier, Homage to Catalonia*
 James Agee: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*
 Edmund Wilson: *To the Finland Station*
 Hannah Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism, The Human Condition*
 Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*

Eldridge Cleaver: *Soul on Ice*
 Michael Herr: *Dispatches*
 Norman Mailer: *Armies of the Night*

Philosophical, Moral, Religious, and Other Treatises

Marcus Aurelius: *The Meditations*
 Erasmus: *In Praise of Folly, The Adages*
 Pascal: *Pensées*
 Stendhal: *On Love*
 Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Genealogy of Morals, Beyond Good and Evil*
 Simone Weil: *The Need for Roots, Waiting for God*
 E. M. Cioran: *The Temptation to Exist*
 Gaston Bachelard: *The Poetics of Space, The Poetics of Reverie*
 Theodor Adorno: *Minima Moralia*

Diaries and Notebooks

Sei Shonagon: *The Pillow Book*
 Kenko: *Essays in Idleness*
 Samuel Pepys: *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*
 James Boswell: *Journals*
 Ralph Waldo Emerson: *The Notebooks*
 Edmond and Jules de Goncourt: *Journals*
 George Templeton Strong: *The Diaries*
 Franz Kafka: *Diaries*
 Anne Frank: *The Diary of Anne Frank*
 Victor Klemperer: *I Shall Bear Witness*
 Cesare Pavese: *The Burning Brand*
 Witold Gombrowicz: *Diary*, vols. 1-3
 André Gide: *Journals*

Letters

Mme. de Sévigné: *Letters to Her Daughter*
 Alexander Pushkin: *Collected Letters*
 Lord Byron: *Byron's Letters and Journals*
 John Keats: *Selected Letters*
 Gustave Flaubert: *Selected Letters*
 Vincent van Gogh: *Dear Theo*
 Franz Kafka: *Letters to Milena*

Aphorisms, Thought Catch-Alls, and Similar Curiosities

La Rochefoucauld: *Maxims*
 La Bruyère: *Characters*
 Robert Burton: *The Anatomy of Melancholy*
 Thomas Browne: *The Urn Burial, Religio Medici*
 Giacomo Leopardi: *Pensieri*
 Cyril Connolly (Palinurus): *The Unquiet Grave*
 Yang Ye (editor): *Vignettes from the Late Ming*

History

Thucydides: *The Peloponnesian War*
 Herodotus: *The Histories*
 Edward Gibbon: *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*
 Thomas Carlyle: *The French Revolution*
 Jules Michelet: *Histories of France*
 Washington Irving: *A History of New York*
 Jacob Burckhardt: *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*
 Henry Adams: *History of the United States under Jefferson and Madison*
 Francis Parkman: *France and England in North America, The Oregon Trail*

Richard Hofstadter: *The Age of Reform, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*

Ferdinand Braudel: *The Mediterranean*

Biographies

Plutarch: *Lives of the Greeks and Romans*

Giorgio Vasari: *Lives of the Artists*

John Aubrey: *Brief Lives*

Samuel Johnson: *Lives of the English Poets*

James Boswell: *Life of Samuel Johnson*

Elizabeth Gaskell: *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*

Charles Sainte-Beuve: *Portraits*

J. Anthony Froude: *Thomas Carlyle*

Lytton Strachey: *Eminent Victorians*

Gertrude Stein: *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*

Geoffrey Scott: *Portrait of Zélide*

Travel and Place

Basho: *Back Roads to Far Towns*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Italian Journey*

Frances Trollope: *Domestic Manners of the Americans*

Astolfe de Custine: *Letters from Russia*

Charles M. Doughty: *Travels in Arabia Deserta*

Robert Louis Stevenson: *Travels with a Donkey*

Mark Twain: *Life on the Mississippi*

Richard F. Burton: *First Footsteps in East Africa, Wanderings in West Africa*

Henry James: *Collected Travel Writings*

Robert Byron: *The Road to Oxiana*

Djuna Barnes: *New York*

Osip Mandelstam: *Journey to Armenia*

Theodore Dreiser: *The Color of a Great City*

Paul Morand: *New York*

Joseph Roth: *What I Saw, Report from a Parisian Paradise*

Louis Aragon: *Paris Peasant*

D. H. Lawrence: *Twilight in Sicily, Sea and Sardinia, Mornings in Mexico*

Eleanor Clark: *Rome and a Villa*

Mary McCarthy: *The Stones of Florence, Venice Observed*

Claude Lévi-Strauss: *Tristes Tropiques*

Joseph Mitchell: *Up in the Old Hotel*

John McNulty: *This Place on Third Avenue*

John Graves: *Goodbye to a River*

Bruce Chatwin: *In Patagonia*

Ryszard Kapuściński: *The Emperor, Another Day of Life, The Shadow of the Sun*

Patrick Leigh Fermor: *A Time of Gifts, Between the Woods and the Water*

Benjamin Taylor: *Naples Declared*