

## BOOK REVIEWS

## Essay-writing is difficult

Eric Ashby

"THE essayist," wrote E. B. White, himself a virtuoso in essay-writing, is "sustained by the childish belief that everything he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest." Essays can be classified as those written to instruct, to persuade, or to entertain. If they have to be limited in length to some 1,200 words, preferably about some scientific topic, they are a difficult art-form for any of these three purposes. This is what Professor Morowitz attempts in this book. It is an assemblage of 57 titbits from the magazine *Hospital Practice*: some to instruct, some to persuade, and all — the author himself confesses — intended to entertain.

To be fair to these essays it is essential to remember that they appeared one at a time, as appetisers, in a magazine devoted (to judge from its title) to the sober topic of how to care for the sick. To offer the reader 57 appetisers, all at once, undiluted by articles on pre-natal clinics and intensive care units, is to expose the appetisers to unreasonable criticism. Only a master in essay-writing could hope to stand up to such criticism. The blurb on the dust-cover "invites comparison to *Lives of a Cell* by Lewis Thomas." This is not fair, for pleasant as some of Morowitz's whimsical pieces are, he is not in the same league as Lewis Thomas, for reasons I shall try to summarise at the end of this review.

Here is a sample of the more enjoyable essays. Morowitz receives a birthday card with the caption: "According to biochemists the materials that make up the human body are only worth 97 cents." He goes through the catalogue of a biochemical company and finds that the market price of the compounds in his body, synthesised from the 97 cents-worth of elements, is of the order of 6 million dollars: a nice reminder that "information is much more expensive than matter." The bicentennial of the United States in 1976 moves him to reflect that 1976 is also the centennial of "the second most significant document produced in the United States, Josiah Willard Gibbs' paper *On the Equilibrium of Heterogeneous Substances*: and there follows an epitome of Gibbs' contribution to science. In another essay he describes a conference of

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*The Wine of Life, and Other Essays on Societies, Energy and Living Things.* By H. J. Morowitz. Pp.265. (St Martin's Press: New York, 1979.) \$10.

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ecologists at the Hague and is shocked at the way they fouled the air with cigars distributed at a reception in their honour. This was an unfortunate theme to choose, for it does invite comparison with Thomas' essay on a medical conference at Atlantic City (*On Societies as Organisms*). Lewis flutters like a graceful bird over the scene of the conference; Morowitz (it seems to me) wades through the scene in gumboots. The essayist (if he has the skill) can be Mozartian in 1,200 words; he cannot, in 1,200 words, be Wagnerian.

Occasionally Morowitz does bring it off. He picks on a phrase in a report about experiments on animals: "the animals were sacrificed." This, in Britain, could mean simply that the worker was complying with the requirements of the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1876. But think (writes Morowitz) about the meaning of the word 'sacrifice': "the slaughter of an animal as an offering to God or a deity." He draws a parallel between the practice of animal sacrifice in religions, which is being phased out, and animal sacrifice in the cause of science, which is on the increase: the incinerator replacing the burnt offering, the control group of rats replacing the Old Testament goat which was not slaughtered; the purpose, however, remaining the same: to "ward off disease, illness, and old age . . .". This is excellent satire, and timely for British readers, for there are at present two Bills before Parliament for the reform of the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1876.

The purpose of some of the essays is to debunk, and Morowitz does this well, if a little heavy-handedly. He publishes a nice letter he wrote to his hairdresser, who tried to persuade him to have his hair treated with a conditioner containing nucleic acid (at, presumably, exorbitant cost). So he considers just what effect applications of DNA or RNA might have on the scalp, and he ends by advising his hairdresser to beware of being an agent for the abuse of words like nucleic acid, proteins, lecithins,

and other mumbo-jumbo borrowed from science to promote profits in the cosmetic industry.

One more example: the essay from which Morowitz chose the title for his book. It is as neat an account as one could get into four pages of the way Claude Bernard (whose home was in the Beaujolais region of France) and, after him, Pasteur, were inspired to do some of their best work by considering "how grape juice becomes wine". This is the use of the essay to instruct and it is as instructor that Morowitz is at his best. He is undoubtedly well read, scholarly, and — consistent with E. B. White's prescription — he wants to tell you what has interested him since the last issue of *Hospital Practice*.

Why, then, do I have reservations (not shared by reviewers quoted on the dust-cover) about the quality of these essays? I have two reasons. One is that essays, unlike articles, published lectures, and monographs, have to be judged primarily upon felicity of style. A good essay sparkles with surprises; it captures your attention without being importunate; it can (Dr Johnson said this about essays) be "an irregular, undigested piece" but it has to convey delight, like a kitten playing with a ball of wool. To do this at all is difficult; to do it on a scientific theme is extremely difficult. I don't find Morowitz's style felicitous: a subjective judgement, of course, and maybe it's my fault and not his.

Second, the essay, unlike other kinds of writing, should tell you a lot about the essayist. After reading Montaigne, Lamb, Jorge Borges — and in science T. H. Huxley, J. B. S. Haldane, and Lewis Thomas — you feel you know the essayist: his prejudices, his enthusiasms, what he stands for. The relation between reader and writer has some of the qualities of friendship. Irregular and undigested as essays may be, they add up to the portrait of a distinct personality. This is what I missed in *The Wine of Life*. □

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