

# ESSAYS *on the* Essay

REDEFINING  
THE GENRE

Edited by Alexander J. Butrym

# Essays on the Essay

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## *Redefining the Genre*

EDITED BY

Alexander J. Butrym

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## Introduction

Alexander J. Butrym

The essay's ability to draw us by indirection out of ourselves makes it a popular genre. Through it we speak to each other across the boundaries of our narrower lives. Ordinary writing often seems done by formula: newspaper reporters hew to their five w's and an h; technical and scientific documents are organized on the time-honored pattern of introduction, materials and methods, results, discussion, and conclusions. But the unprogrammed form of the essay speaks to everyone; there is more to medicine than doctoring. To discover this fullness, doctor must speak not to doctor but to pianist, rancher, monk, and even professor of English. The essay is the lingua franca of the overly specialized. It raises questions about culture, and its "essayistic" conclusions are local and subject to revision.

But such popularity itself signals misunderstanding of the essay's nature. The entries under the subject and title headings "Essay" or "Essays" in most card catalogues, for instance, fill two or more drawers. In the on-line catalogue of the Firestone Library at Princeton University, there are about 30,000 entries under "Essays" between the years 1980 and 1988. The large count in itself is not very helpful to the reader searching for collections of essays or for critical commentary on the genre. It does, however, invite inferences about the essay as a form, as a way of shaping experience, in a culture fragmented by many narrow voices.

Even more telling, *Library of Congress Subject Headings* notes that collections of essays will be found under "Essays." A search for them confronts the reader with the dreary task of flipping through drawers full of cards listing collections that may have such titles as *Essays in Microdynamic Economics*, *Essays in Medieval History Presented to Bertie Wilkinson*, *Essays on Biosynthesis and Microbial Development*, and *The Essays Throwing Light on the Gandharvas, the Apsarases, the Yakshas, and the Kinnaras*. Other titles and topics are much duller, and relentlessly

so, except to small coteries of scholars. The system jumbles learned treatises of all sorts with the works of classical essay writers such as Montaigne, Lamb, and Bacon. As Richard Kostelanetz commented in another context, were it not silly to do so, we might equally well call all these pieces "writing" rather than essays (ix). In many of these pieces, the genre's freedom to range has been restricted, and the essay has been forced into narrow servitude. The term has almost become a word that connotes without denoting: it suggests a piece of writing that tends toward or away from respectably, formally, and intellectually presenting a more or less subjective view of a more or less objective phenomenon. Such an "essay" may or may not need to be as thoroughly documented as a scholarly article ought to be.

The genre itself is possibly to blame for its own subversion: essays are as comfortable with microbes and microdynamics as with France in the seventeenth century and California in the twentieth. Consequently, they willingly accommodate scientific, theoretical, and analytical discussions which aspire to a level of philosophical generalization similar to that of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. But such pieces are certainly not formed on the model of the essays in, for instance, the *Georgia Review*, which favors "essays that appeal simultaneously to two rather different audiences: the educated general reader interested in confronting new ideas and areas of knowledge, and a range of professionals and academic specialists looking for refinements of, and challenges to, their already extensive studies" (Lindberg, 247).

But the essay undercuts its own status in another way. Its formlessness, which allows us to speak beyond ourselves—or beyond persons much like ourselves—scatters the essay so broadly that it sometimes seems marginally effective as literature. The heading "collections of essays" in the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* omits much; one does not find the work of contemporary literary essayists. Although every card catalogue lists Pope's *Essay on Man*, Lamb's *Essays of Elia*, and editions of Emerson and Thoreau, other collections, by such writers as Richard Selzer, Joan Didion, and Annie Dillard—let alone Alice Walker, Tillie Olson, Gore Vidal, Theodore Weiss, Gretel Erlich, and Lewis Thomas—are typically scattered across the alphabet. The Library of Congress's subject heading for Annie Dillard's *Encounters with Chinese Writers* is "Chinese Literature—20th century—anecdotes, facetiae, satires, etc." For *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, the subject headings are "1. Nature" and "2. Life." Readers of drama, or poetry, or short fiction—forms read far less often than essays—know where to look for collections of such pieces. But essays, like

the insights they disclose, must be sought at random and discovered by accident.

Obviously, the literary essay itself does not receive the respect accorded its literary and nonliterary counterparts. When E. B. White spoke of essayists as second-class citizens, he was voicing the opinion not of fellow essayists but of everyone else. Nowadays, though, even Joseph Epstein seems to grant the essay a diminished status in relation to other genres and in relation to the position that the essay itself once held in the minds of Victorian and early twentieth-century readers. Among many “professional writers,” as among professional readers within the academy, the essay has the low status that it is given in *Leaven of Malice*, the second novel of Robertson Davies’s “Salterton Trilogy.” In this work, Swithin Shillito is a seventy-eight-year-old newspaper reporter who hopes to drop in harness, almost as though he is afraid of boredom in retirement, which would leave him alone with his own mind.

Shillito’s journalistic forte (his stint, as he calls it) is the personal piece—the short, whimsical essay on such topics as the fate of the toothpick, the vanishing of walking sticks, and “the importance of snuff and birdseed.” His work is described: “The mantle of the eighteenth-century essayist—old, frowsy, tattered, greasy and patched with Addison’s gout rags and the seat of the gentle Elia’s pants—had fallen upon Swithin Shillito, and he strutted and postured in it every day” (263). Gloster Ridley, his editor, is realistic about the world and his work; a vigorous, intellectually demanding editor, he dismisses Shillito’s trivia and his pretensions. Serious pieces are editorials about government plans for seaway projects. Robertson Davies has himself been a college teacher as well as a novelist and dramatist, and he by no means champions the newspaper editorial or the practical journalistic article over any literary work. But he does portray essay and essay writer as denizens of the past, long past their primes and long overdue for retirement.

The academic world did not conspire to devalue the essay as a literary form, nor did it displace the form suddenly or melodramatically. Instead, little jolts led to major dislocation. One of these jolts dropped distinctions between the essay and popular journalistic feature writing, and the essay lost its cachet as a belletristic form. Another jolt related to the general inclination in modern popular culture for immediate satisfaction and instant entertainment, and this also tended to devalue the essay’s appeal, which depends on pleasures experienced by a meditative mind free to meander leisurely in quiet moments. The essay was buffeted again when professors insisted that students use it to learn “writing skills.” English

teachers found the essay a new place in the curriculum: further obscuring the distinction between the literary and the practical, composition teachers turned the essay into a source of exemplary materials. An early example of this phenomenon, Burgess Johnson's 1927 textbook *Essaying the Essay*, describes itself as "not so much about essays as about essay writing. Selection from the work of past masters has been made with training in view, and not with any idea of furnishing a textbook for those interested solely in the place the Essay occupies in literature" (vii).

This devaluation of the essay seems to have gone so far that, when essays were taught, the tendency was to overlook elements which made them unsuitable as examples of effective exposition and to see and teach only those aspects of them which fit preconceived notions of what good, straightforward prose ought to be. The upshot is that, when literary values are discussed in the first year of the college English course, essays are seldom considered. Only a fairly limited canon of poems, plays, and fiction comes in for attention.

In relegating essays to the role of models for students to imitate in freshman composition, in other words, English departments over the years have gradually and quietly excluded the essay from serious literary study and have in effect "abandoned" the genre. This academic dissociation has also reinforced the idea among educated readers that the essay is somehow isolated from other allegedly more important types of literature. It has led to skewed notions that imagination and creativity are divorced from fact and that style and flair in writing are restricted to fiction, poetry, and drama as well as to odd notions of just what distinguishes objective viewpoints from subjective and personal styles from impersonal.

If the essay's first problem is lack of clear definition, its second is such lack of status. The essay is associated with the facetious, the trivial, and the anecdotal on the one hand and with the learned treatise and useful, effective expository writing on the other. Neither of these is the concern of the traditional, liberal-arts-oriented literature department.

But the status of the essay affects more than the English curriculum. It affects all of the humanities, because the essay concerns itself with all of humanistic education—biography, literature, philosophy (with its special concern for ethical, moral, and aesthetic relations), history, and theology. With Montaigne, the personal essay was grounded in humanistic thought. One of Montaigne's inspirations came from the Latin poet Terence: "Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto." The essay is based, according to Montaigne's practice, on the investigation of the self in its manifold relations. An understanding of the art of the essay in its tech-

nical variety and its sensitivity to broadly human concerns prepares students for a lifelong process of personal discovery and education in the humanities.

If the definition and status of the genre are unclear, perhaps the cause is that academic criticism of the genre has also languished. Returning to the library card catalogue, under the heading "Essay" one should find works on the essay as a literary form—but there are not many of them, and most of these are not written in English. A cursory analysis of the nineteen-page polyglot bibliography in one monograph (*Teoria del Ensayo*, 147–165) illustrates the point more concretely. Most of the works on the essay written between 1950 and 1980 were in Spanish, and the majority were articles. German writers made a showing during the 1950s and 1960s; again articles outnumbered monographs by nearly 3 to 1. In English most of the work was done in the 1920s and 1930s, with a flurry occurring from the 1950s to 1970s. These latter works were frequently introductions to essay anthologies, many of which are composition textbooks that restrict their scope to the "college" essay. Or they are reprints in the Essay Index Reprint series. The past decade has seen very few additions to this list. Writing on the essay as a genre has been done from a nonacademic viewpoint: it is the response of the practitioner rather than that of the professor.

And yet essays continue to be written and read with interest. Although they may not be in collections clearly labeled for the cataloguers' convenience, they can be found in many literary quarterlies, which include them in addition to the usual freight of "critical" literary essays. They are found not only in the *Georgia Review* but also in such periodicals as the *Sewanee Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, *Antaeus*, *Hudson Review*, *Antioch Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, the *Southern Review*, *Yale Review*, and *North American Review*. They also appear in several leading popular magazines for general readers, including *Harper's*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Esquire*. In addition, many news magazines with general circulation highlight pieces of special interest by labeling them essays.

The problem, then, is threefold. In the first place, it is a matter of definition. Just what is an essay? Are essays truly to be classed as literature? Is it still possible to point to a work and say this or that in it aids the taxonomy?

Second, and a consequence of the difficulty with nomenclature, is the problem of status. Why are essayists considered second-class citizens? Was E. B. White's remark to be taken at face value? Or is such self-deprecation a convention of the form? Does the essay have a place as a major literary form, as poems, plays, and novels do?

Third, what part should the essay play in the modern curriculum? Is it

more than a tool for use in composition courses? If, in the first year of college English, the essay were taught with a better understanding of the nature of the personal commitment involved in writing it, might the course entail less mechanical drudgery and more of the traditional liberal arts which English faculties pride themselves on professing?

The essays in the present volume originated in "The Essay: Redefining a Genre for the Humanities," a two-part symposium held at Seton Hall University in the spring of 1987. A few papers reprinted here from literary quarterlies first appeared shortly after the collection was conceived and have been included here for their contribution to an understanding of the genre and its importance. Our hope is to renew academic interest in the literary essay. We are concerned less with defending the essay form than with stimulating a discussion of it.

The essay by O. B. Hardison, Jr., "Binding Proteus: An Essay on the Essay," should be regarded as sounding the keynote for this discussion. As a survey of historical practice, it introduces the genre and provides a context for many of the pieces that follow it.

The writers in the next group, described as "Essayists on Their Work," have all written as essayists, not as professors. Scott Russell Sanders, Barbara Mellix, and Rockwell Gray explore the personal nature of the essayist's point of view, language, location, and commitment to the genre.

Various moments in the history of the essay are described by the third group of writers, those concerned with history, criticism, and appreciation. These essays include investigations and evaluations of changes that have been rung upon the form, of various conceptions classical essayists have had of it, and of the practice of some contemporary essayists. Paul Korshin discusses changes in literary reputation resulting from changes in the audiences of Sam Johnson's *The Rambler*. Robert Atwan provides a transition from theoretical to practical criticism; in describing Emerson's method as an essayist, Atwan introduces considerations of the status of the essay as a literary form. Also in this section, Michael Hall suggests ways in which literary essays reflected cultural assumptions of their times and the varying needs for information and meditation. Hall describes the essay as a philosophical, psychological, and literary metaphor in the history of the idea of exploration.

Nancy Enright examines William Hazlitt's ideas about the "familiar style" in order to suggest a new understanding of the place of the literary essay in the writing teacher's scheme of things.

J. P. Riquelme, Duane Edwards, Georgia Johnston, and Charles O'Neill describe the ways in which T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and W. B. Yeats—all better known for their work in other gen-



res—extended the essay and affected its literary reputation by their practice.

In the fourth group, “Critical Theory and Definition,” writers define the essay’s structure, function, and relation to both literature and humane learning in general. George Core charts the changing interests and practices of E. B. White, A. J. Leibling, and Joseph Mitchell, all of whom wrote for the *New Yorker* and moved the American essay in a new direction. William Howarth writes about contemporary essayists responding to their times and places. R. Lane Kauffmann surveys the theoretical underpinnings provided for a certain kind of essay by contemporary Continental philosopher-critics.

The final group of writers deals with questions of pedagogy, including broad issues relating to the place of the essay in the modern humanities curriculum. Kurt Spellmeyer’s “A Common Ground: The Essay in the Academy” offers a deeper, less mechanical, and more humane understanding of what is entailed in the process of learning to write than is frequently provided in college English departments. Thomas Recchio and Douglas Hesse relate teaching to current critical textual and communication research and theory.

A book of this nature is plainly not the product of one person’s initiative, effort, or imagination. I acknowledge with gratitude support received from the New Jersey Department of Higher Education. Without a grant from the department’s Humanities Program, the symposium—and the meeting of critical minds that it made possible—would not have taken place. On a more personal note, special thanks go to Robert Atwan, whose many ideas and suggestions have been both seminal and practical in fashioning this book and the symposium from which it grew. I also thank Stanley Lindberg for helpful suggestions regarding the manuscript and George Core for encouragement. To Beth Harrison and William Howarth in the Department of English at Princeton University, I am grateful for making available working space while my own college removed asbestos. In his evaluation of the conference, Emory Elliott, also of Princeton University, made many comments which helped me decide the book’s contents. I thank Jane Jubilee for typing and Marcia Brubeck for her outstanding copyediting of the manuscript. And finally, to the provost of Seton Hall University and to the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences I owe thanks for the sabbatical year which gave me the time to edit this volume.

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# Part One

## *Keynote*