On Essays - Montaigne to the Present

Edited by Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy

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On Essays – Montaigne to the Present is a volume of seventeen essays and the detail in which its subject matter is explored far exceeds our ability to account for it in a comparatively short review; having little alternative, it makes sense to respond to this volume, as its editors suggest, in an apparently desultory manner and follow only whatever diaphanous webbing happens to form.

DS: Loosely speaking, I would say that this volume is best construed as offering a co-ordinated reaction to the institutionalisation of the essay. Most of our readers will have experience with a certain, narrow definition of the essay that is commonplace in universities—a genre of the essay that has evolved in concert with the institutional pressures of rubrics and formal guidelines, which is to say nothing of the extraneous political trends and pressures that exert themselves in universities. But, as Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy remark, this institutionalisation of the essay—the increased tendency to regard the form as the sole preserve of universities—has crabbed its ability to articulate itself to public discourse and runs the risk of hiving off serious thought and intellectual discussion inside the walls of the institution. The editors make clear a peculiar irony entailed by the institutionalisation of the essay (a historically provisional and haphazard form) in the twentieth century:

> *One of the oddities of the essay is that it begins as a literary genre of tentativeness and resistance to institutionalized knowledge, but is now most commonly written as the standard mode of instruction and assessment and usual genre of school and undergraduate writing, especially in the humanities. (29).*

This irony is leveraged throughout the volume by its contributors; it works to corrode a rigid, institutional definition of the essay, revising this in favour of 'a form which allows for both detachment and political force; for serious attention to ephemeral details of life and culture; and for the improvisational hazarding of judgements, arguments, and ideas' (29). While most essays in this volume are, set in these terms, relatively orthodox works of historicist criticism, the venturesome range of topics and the subtle, imaginative lines of thought taken ought to effectively quell any such gripe on this count.

It is interesting how, almost without exception, the essays in this volume subscribe to the essay as a form of experiential writing, as an autobiographical exercise as much as a discursive one. This is a dominant current of many pieces in this volume. In each case, adopting this simple stance enables an often fruitful corrosion of the genre of the essay into other forms that might be bracketed as 'life-writing'— abrogating the partitions, for instance, between the essay and letters, diaries, memoirs, or autobiographical fiction. For me, what this volume does particularly well, even if it is *sotto voce*, is to resuscitate the importance of experience and proposition in the composition of essays as a rebuke to the institutional culture of objectivity and certainty to which we are long-accustomed. I recognise in my own writing, as I am sure yourself or some of our readers will, a certain bashfulness, or indiscretion, associated with including material drawn from experience or subjective matter; sometimes you find yourself adopting bizarre verbal constructions as a means of navigating this unease. An inevitable consequence of institutionalising the essay has been that it teaches us to associate our own subjectivity, ultimately, with a culture of fear. Anne Carson writes peerlessly about an unease with her own selfhood intruding upon her writing, an unease internalised from her academic background. In *Economy of the Unlost* (1999), Carson describes academic writing as consisting of a fretful process of dashing back and forth between the 'windowless monad' of subjectivity and the 'landscape of science and fact' (Carson 1999: vii). There is much in these essays, with the stress on proposition, liminality, and experience as primary events in the essay, that remind me of Carson's account of academic composition:

> *And yet, you know as well as I, thought finds itself in this room in its best moments—locked inside its own pressures, fishing up facts of the landscape from notes or memory as well as it may—vibrating (as Mallarmé would say) with their disappearance (ibid: vii).*

If I were to venture to frame this collection for readers, and what they stand to gain, it would be in Carson's terms: that too often we have pushed ourselves—or been pushed out—into that darkening landscape of facticity and objective scrutiny and from which, in time, through habit or custom, we have forgotten to return. I was wondering if you had similar experiences of these essays, and if you wanted to elaborate on any of this?

CW: I agree, and I love the image of the essay genre as a landscape, either wild or tamed, which

chimes with my experience of the volume. It is surprising how little time or space is dedicated to conceptualising the essay in schools, colleges, and universities. But that is not to say that the essay is completely reified or politically inert. Adorno writes powerfully about the essay form as a form of resistance and a form of freedom. In 'The Essay as Form' he describes the German 'Versuch' (to attempt or essay) as combining the sense of hitting the bullseye, with the knowledge that the attempt is only ever provisional and fragmentary. The essay 'starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about' (Adorno 1991: 4). In other words, essays do not have a pre-determined origin or fixed endpoint; they unfold according to a logic that is determined by the particularity of the concepts and material they approach. There is an ethics of non-violence and intellectual openness in Adorno's subject-object dialectic, as well as a theory about the essay's radical ability to disrupt categories, classifications, and established boundaries.

Adorno's valorisation of essay form is an intriguing point of reference for Karshan and Murphy's *On Essays*, a collection of essays that embrace Adorno's conception of the essay's errancy and openness. Unlike Adorno's essay, Karshan and Murphy's volume does, however, have a fixed point of origin: Montaigne. It is fitting, therefore, that Karshan opens the volume with an essay entitled 'What is an Essay? Thirteen Answers from Virginia Woolf'. Here, Karshan sets in motion the two organising principles of the volume. One is chronological (from Montaigne to the present). The other appeals to the wide range of metaphors essayists have used to describe their compositions; the essay can be an attempt or a trial (from the French essai), an experiment, a valuation, a weighing-up, a ramble, a taste, and so on. Each chapter pursues one or more of the essay's metaphors or threads of images.

Karshan traces and illustrates thirteen of these at work in Woolf's brilliant essay 'Street Haunting', a story in which Woolf ventures 'among the quotations that bear the wisdom of the past' (Karshan 2020: 34) as much as through the wintry London streets; the flâneuse's essaying becomes an encapsulation of the genre's (and Woolf's reading of the genre's) miscellaneous themes, traditions, and motifs. Woolf's three pilgrimages to Montaigne's tower, in 1931, 1937, and 1938, provide a strong illustrative example of Woolf's 'lifelong reverence' (37) for Montaigne, which forms the framework for Karshan's elegant reading of Woolf's materiality of writing (the talismanic importance of the pencil, the study, the bookshop, etc. to essay-writing). On the surface, Woolf's essay is about formal beauty and the eye; the 'central oyster of perceptiveness' (Woolf 2009: 178). These surface illusions are quickly broken as Woolf, or her persona, ventures out the door and is forced to confront 'her own middle-class complacency' (49). The compressed history of essayistic free association here, which Karshan traces to explore the ethics and politics surrounding Woolf's rapid sequence of encounters in 'Street Haunting', includes Joseph Addison, Thomas De Quincey, William Hazlitt's 'The Indian Jugglers', Aldous Huxley, and Sigmund Freud. If this is not dazzling enough, it is followed by Warren Boutcher's chapter, which is a broad,

panoramic history of the miscellaneous and encyclopaedic forms in essay writing. A very impressive range, but I'm still none the wiser as to the question, what is an essay?

DS: Absolutely, I feel as though the thoroughgoing accounts of the multivalency of the essay— practically every essay includes some etymological retracing of the term — have the odd, countervailing effect of militating against a definition of what constitutes an essay. Readers hoping for some stable definition of the essay may quickly learn that this volume's interest is not in narrowing terms but in pluralising them. And yet, although the concerns of this volume are profoundly literary and deal primarily with the essay as it existed in remote historical periods, there is a sense that the historical definitions offered cut across the rigidly maintained boundaries of historical periods and somehow articulate themselves to our own contemporary writing practices. It is interesting you mention Hazlitt's superb 'The Indian Jugglers'; in a volume replete with definitions and redefinitions of the essay, I incline most towards the one given in Gregory Dart's essay, in a section discussing Hazlitt's 'The Letter-Bell' alongside Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight':

> *More than any other literary form (with the possible exception of the blank verse conversation poem) what [the Romantic essay] aspires to is not so much thought's distillate but its process of fermentation—the manner in which ideas resonate and communicate with one another. (181).*

What a beautiful way to articulate the indeterminacy of the Romantic essay, and by extension the essay genre: the essay as fermentation. Dart's figure of the process of fermentation for writing is suggestive of Geoffrey Hill's line: 'How studiously one cultivates the sugars of decay' (Hill 2013: 144). Rather than offer the reader only what has been eventually distilled out of its material, the Romantic essayist includes this sundry material and ferments these ideas together, illustrating a gradual and sometimes volatile development. According to Dart, cross-pollination with the Romantic lyric, and the lyric's concern with everyday expression, grants Romantic essayists, like Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, or Thomas De Quincey, a certain flexibility as regards meaning, which remains propositional rather than aggregational in Romantic writing. Like the Romantic lyric, the movement most characteristic of the Romantic essay, according to Dart, is to begin with particulars, with the stuff of the everyday experience, and move towards more abstract thought by a knotty process of indirection and irruption. The process, again like the Romantic lyric, is as open to failure as it is to success. In the moments where this contingent process succeeds the reader experiences the marvellous decomposition of the essay's initial everyday components into the sugars of abstract thought and revelation. The Romantic essay, as it ferments ideas together, is 'a lyrical medium, but one that is continually being interrupted by the most prosaic, and pragmatic, of concerns.' (180). Ultimately, this figures the composition of the essay as a discursive and curious search through disparate, heteroclite materials for

patterns and correspondences that were otherwise hidden. I found this account of the process of essay writing especially compelling. But how about yourself?

CW: Yes, the processes of decomposition and fermentation are intriguing metaphors here. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that in alchemy fermentation describes a supposed internal change in the composition of metals, which was how Chaucer used it. In 'Of Sticks and Stones: Essay, Experience, and Experiment' Kathryn Murphy traces the emergence of the association of the essay with the scientific experiment in the seventeenth century. That Murphy is one of the best writers of academic essays in English studies today alone makes this chapter worth reading.

She opens with a series of sketches: Boswell's famous account of Samuel Johnson kicking a stone in refutation of Bishop Berkeley's idealism, Zeno's beating of a servant for committing theft (the servant claims he was compelled by fate, to which Zeno responds so is he), Diogenes's response to Zeno's claim that there is no motion (he stood up and began walking). These sketches, that counter philosophical abstraction with bodily experience (79), culminate in a reading of Montaigne's kidney stones in 'Of Experience'. Montaigne's stones here are apposite to Hill's 'sugars of decay'; writing is figured in terms of gestation but also paradox: the non-verbal argument becomes a prompt for verbal elaboration, and individual, idiosyncratic experience (Montaigne's body makes and accretes the kidney stones) becomes a 'question of transmission of thoughts and inclinations' (he inherited the stones from his father), (85).

The identification of 'essay' and 'experience' with the 'experiment' and 'experimental' has an amazingly complex history. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer accuse Francis Bacon (the first person in England to publish works entitled 'essays') of instrumentalising knowledge to dominate nature and of neutralising the experimental, which is open-ended, with the strict controls of the experiment (Goehr 2008:108–135). Murphy's reading of Bacon, the 'figurehead of the emergence of experimental philosophy' (88), is at least partially a rebuke to Adorno: Bacon's essays retain the Montaignian 'experiential observation, the garnerings of the particular lived life', but it is 'experience schooled and cooled into the impersonal' (89). In a beautiful series of manoeuvres, Murphy reads Bacon and Robert Boyle's essays for their Adornian essayistic qualities; the way they draw attention to their own mediations and formally experiment with the reading experience. It is a lovely point that runs through 'Of Stick and Stones' which describes how, when reading essays, we do not experience another's pain, but we do experience reading about it. And that is what an essay is: an experience. A lovely point, which is also embedded in a chapter that acts as a seriously strong exploration of the essay genre's association with science and scientific methods. Following Murphy's chapter, in 'Time and the Essay' Markman Ellis describes his own experiment in which he read one issue of *The Spectator* each day for one year

and nine months. The result is a fascinating account of both the materiality of print culture in the early eighteenth century (most of the paper used for *The Spectator* was recycled and the daily production required they use two printing houses) as well as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's 'intellectual project' (100) which envisioned *The Spectator* as 'ushering philosophy from the closed scholarly world of closets and libraries, schools and colleges into a new life dwelling in clubs and assemblies, at tea-table and coffee-houses' (103). For Ellis, the paper's unpredictable 'parade of topics' (105), which form a wonderfully Joycean list, stress the essay's playful, provisional miscellaneity. But he also detects 'circadian and infradian rhythms' (106) in which Saturday's papers take on a more serious topic before the Sunday break and congruences emerge between the essays and the seasons. For readers interested in essays, print culture, and the materiality of text, I would highly recommend Ellis's approach to daily time through the 'Penny Papers'. And this insistence, on the tension in the literary essay between the academic and the everyday, the reclusive and the social, the disposability of the present and the recovery of the past, lends to the volume much of its fascination. Would you agree?

DS: I would say this is undoubtedly the case; several times I found that the authors of these pieces were lending definition to ideas that I had only half-intuited, if at all. György Lukács—whose opinions, alongside Adorno's, recur throughout these essays—suggested that the essay was above all a Socratic form, based on dialogue with another. Appropriately enough, our own response to these essays takes the form of a dialogic essay, a conversation between friends. Entering a conversation with another through essay, especially a writer with whom we may have no connection and may no longer be living, is not only to strike up a dialogue, but a kind of filiation. I suppose I am thinking here of the remarks to this effect in Jacques Derrida's *The Work of Mourning* (2001), where Derrida's writing is innately conscious of a conversation underway between oneself and the other in oneself, retained even after they have passed away, and of the desire to let that other speak in their own words; there is a manner in which the essay form, an ongoing conversation, is also a vessel for other voices, to allow others to speak in their own voice and to add your own to theirs.

Derrida's writing in the immediate wake of the loss of a friend, which combines essayistic composition with oracular, eulogistic qualities, resembles what Tom F. Wright's piece in this collection calls, in a beautiful coinage, 'the voiced essay'—regrettably, post-structuralist essays are not much considered in this volume. Wright's piece argues that there emerged in the nineteenth century a form of essay that sought to combine written and oracular forms of address: 'a form explained not only by its didacticism or suggestively sermonic qualities but by its engagement with orality on the level of style and idea' (208). For Wright the best practitioners of this were Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, although, to my mind, this applies equally to John Ruskin, whose essayistic style contains considerable 'oral residue' and is heavily inflected by the English sermon tradition. Where the 'voiced essay'

deviates from its precursor the Romantic essay, and perhaps from this essay, is in its inclination to public address, imagining itself not just as a private conversation but a public one. Indeed, in this respect, Ruskin's writing is a particularly fascinating blend of hectoring public and coded private address. I can certainly see a place for Derrida's writing on loss and friendship in all this though—perhaps it is something to explore after this piece. This would be essay-writing figured as a vessel for conversation, for dialogue with others, with friends, and/or with the dead, those we have lost or may never have known, to summon up other voices into this medium and allow them to be heard—to make our writing, as Ruskin said apropos of ancient ruins, 'voiceful'.

It is a shame this conversation has to end here—

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