

Further Readings on the Essay

Mary Kim, ed.
Stanford University

THE FOLLOWING BIBLIOGRAPHY AIMS TO INCLUDE influential and interesting accounts of the literary essay, without any claim to comprehensiveness. Studies that parse the form and function of the essay and situate the genre historically and institutionally have been emphasized over biographically inclined scholarship on individual essayists. Discussions of the essay inevitably complain of how the genre has long been bereft of critical analysis; but recently, essays on the essay seem to be gaining momentum. One particularly promising work in press might be *Of Essays* (Oxford UP, forthcoming), eds. Kathryn Murphy and Thomas Karshan, a collected volume that considers essayistic traditions from Montaigne to the present and the essay's quarrels and collusions with other forms of discourse.

Adorno, Theodor. "The Essay as Form." *The Adorno Reader*. Ed. Brian O'Connor.
Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 92-111.

The "point" is unsurprising to those familiar with Adorno—the essay form refuses dogma and must perpetually reflect upon itself; this praxis of open-ended illumination frees objective meaning, which is socially constituted. Readers impatient with Adorno's axioms may be interested in his most observational passage on "the bad essay," replete with examples of "the essay's capitulation" to "the permanent temptation" of "fictional biographies and all the related commercial writing" (94). (Intriguingly, one culprit blasted by Adorno, Stefan Zweig, has become the subject of much essayistic attention recently.)



Atkins, G. Douglas. *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2005.

Atkins writes prodigiously on the essay, often in very personal or polemical registers (a more recent monograph, *On the Familiar Essay* (U of Georgia P, 2009), signals its combativeness with the subtitle, “Challenging Academic Orthodoxies”). Throughout his work, Atkins is concerned with appraising and refining the category of the “familiar essay.” The essay’s affinities for the amateur, extolled by the author, might be expanded upon by interested scholars.

Bensmaïa, Réda. *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*. Trans. Pat Fedkiew. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987.

From our present critical vantage, it may be tough to rehabilitate a work like that of Bensmaïa’s, so thoroughly committed to explicating the essay in poststructuralist Theory-speak. The author’s insistence, however, that the essay had to wait to be “born theoretically” with certain writers, might give rise to future studies on an interesting new genealogy of the essay (for instance, can we attribute the minoritization of the essay to something other than a mystified sense of its open-ended form?).

Black, Scott. *Of Essays and Reading in Early Modern Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Departing from prevailing accounts that focus on the early modern *essayist’s* self-fashioning, Black historicizes the “process of participatory *reading* at the size and scale of the essay” (4, emphasis added) from Cornwallis to Fielding. Scholars in history of the book and genetic criticism will be interested to learn of the essay’s compositional roots in the commonplace book. Black mounts a compelling case against theories that essentialize the essay as either modernist or postmodernist, instead emphasizing its continuity as a literary form, one that “perhaps doesn’t develop that much at all” (6).

De Obaldia, Claire. *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1995.

Opening up received notions of the essay as “literature *in potentia*”—an aspirational, not-yet-literary species—de Obaldia’s winsomely erudite study explores the complex relationships (real and ideological) between literary genre, mode, and style that are figured through the essay. As she observes, the essay “remains very much alive throughout literary history, *even* in those neo-sceptical eras when generalized essayism is the prominent characteristic (or ‘disease’, as some would see it) of literature” (57, emphasis added). Here, the antagonistic positioning of essay to essayism, instead of a banal alliance between the two, is what fascinates.

Encyclopedia of the Essay. Ed. Tracy Chevalier. London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997.

The eighteenth-century golden era of the essay saw the recurring figure of the virtuoso as the discomfiting double of the essayist. The model essayist was to enlighten without being overrun by factoids, a fault to which the virtuoso was highly susceptible. Chevalier's voluminous reference book turns this history inside out, as it is now the essay itself that is probed and pursued in all directions. The inexorably serendipitous (i.e. alphabetical) order of an encyclopedia creates curious neighbors: "The Defence of Poesy" and "Defoe, Daniel"; "Spanish American Essay" and "The Spectator"; "Ngugi wa Thiong'o" and "Nietzsche," among others.

Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre. Ed. Alexander J. Butrym. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1989.

Originally delivered at a symposium in 1987, the essays in this collection reveal their provenance in two ways: a tendency to privilege clear delivery over dense analysis, and a shared concern with the essay's role in the contemporary production and dissemination of knowledge (exegetic or counter-ideological?). The topical air of some essays feels quaint in 2014, but there are plenty of miscellaneous remarks that spur further inquiry (for instance, one contributor, George Core, connects the flatness of characters in late twentieth-century short stories—a throwback to "Scott and Dickens and Hardy" (219)—with the scenic expository techniques of the essay). R. Lane Kauffmann's essay deserves special mention for a lucid gloss of continental philosophy's treatment of the essay.

Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time. Eds. Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2012.

A cross-section of reflections on the essay by its major practitioners over four centuries, this collection includes seminal accounts of the essay that are less accessible in English scholarship, notably Max Bense's "On the Essay and Its Prose." A formidable bibliography of more than 170 works on the essay follows, as does a topical index reorganizing these entries. Indeed, part of the current bibliography's aim is to provisionally adopt the distinction that Klaus makes in the introduction between essay and article—we have chosen to headline *articles* on the essay, rather than essays on the essay.

Gigante, Denise. Introduction. *The Great Age of the English Essay: An Anthology*. Ed. Gigante. New Haven: Yale UP, 2008.

In this vibrant introduction to an anthology of thirteen prominent essayists hailing from the golden days of the English essay, Gigante canvasses scenes from the Republic of Letters to unfold the eighteenth-century periodical essay's auspices and afterlives. Suggestive connections are drawn between the serialized personae and stock types that populate these essays and the characters later found in Victorian fiction.

Good, Graham. *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*. London: Routledge, 1988.

The thesis is modest—the essay as democratic form—but the telling is refreshingly commonsensical, sprinkled with engaging bits of trivia (Charles Lamb’s overwhelming popularity in Japan, for instance). The early essays’ anti-scholasticism is memorably compared to the anti-institutional streak of the essay form today. Bibliographic notes list several studies on the essay from the early 1980’s backward.

Harrison, Thomas. *Essayism: Conrad, Musil, and Pirandello*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992.

Harrison invokes the term “essayism” to name the impossible theorizations of modern experience; the essay, “a utopian attempt to develop the possibilities of form to a virtually infinite degree” (14), is linked to the unending formations and un-formations of self that give the lie to worldviews that claim to pre-structure existence. Conrad, Musil, and Pirandello appear as case studies. Harrison’s reading of Lukács in the introduction is especially illuminating.

Himmelfarb, Gertrude. Introduction. *The Spirit of the Age: Victorian Essays*. Ed. Himmelfarb. New Haven: Yale UP, 2007.

This brief prelude to a collection of Victorian essays includes some enjoyable statistics: circulation figures for nineteenth-century periodicals, readership size, average article page length, etc.

Lukács, Georg. “On the Nature and the Form of the Essay.” *Soul and Form*. Eds. John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis. Trans. Anna Bostock. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. 1–18.

Framed as an epistle, Lukács’s essay is perhaps paradigmatic of its kind in its vacillating topical focus punctuated by cogent aphorisms. One evocative example reads, “in the works of the essayists form *becomes* destiny, it is the destiny-creating principle” (23). Lukács famously suggests that as a form of critique, the essay determines values in art and life not through “the verdict . . . but the process of judging” (34). Interestingly, the implied generic others of the essay would here appear to be poetry and drama, with the novel conspicuously absent.

McCarthy, John A. *Crossing Boundaries: A Theory and History of Essay Writing in German, 1680-1815*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1989.

The sheer profusion of critical discourses on the essay that McCarthy cites may astonish the Anglo-American scholar, resigned to much sparser literature on the “fourth genre” (12). The curious endgame of this impressive study is that twentieth-century theory is actively used as entry points but then revealed to be already anticipated by essayistic writing in Germany in the period in question.

The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives. Eds. Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.

Do female writers have a special franchise in the history of essay writing? Despite the form's entrenched associations with the "feminine," attempted responses to this question have been scant; this collection might be a representative first of its kind. Several contributors argue for renewed attention to essayistic *content* just as much as form, especially in considering African-American or Latin-American women writers. See also the introduction for a definition of the essay that seems to allow for a greater element of argument "at its core" (16) than the dominant theories would have it. Exchanges between speech / talk and the essay are explored.

Walker, Hugh. *The English Essay and Essayists.* London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1923.

This is a history that has aged well. Chronicling the English essay's trajectory from the renaissance to the late nineteenth century, this 1915 study is unburdened by the need to make the essay do too much. Walker's occasionally scathing remarks are briskly matter-of-fact (of Hazlitt: "for nervous English he is the rival of the greatest" (174)), and the vigor of his style is matched only by the force of his erudition. A