

## A History of the Essay and the Havoc It Wreaked

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### Abstract:

Rather than aiming at a unified definition or portrayal of the essay genre, this edited volume seeks to investigate some of the various forms and transformations in which the essay has appeared throughout different time periods and cultures. Indeed, most articles come up with highly significant insights about the essay and succeed in illuminating the genre from alternative and non-canonical perspectives, e.g. by describing certain texts as essays which so far have not been subsumed under this label. Yet the compilation could have tackled the diverse fields it seeks to cover in a more representative manner.

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Flothow, Dorothea; Oppolzer, Markus and Sabine Coelsch-Foisner (eds.): *The Essay: Forms and Transformations*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2017. 337 pages. 56 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-8253-7736-6.

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Rather than aiming at a unified definition or portrayal of the essay genre, this edited volume seeks to investigate some of the various forms and transformations in which the essay has appeared throughout different time periods and cultures. Indeed, most articles come up with highly significant insights about the essay and succeed in illuminating the genre from alternative and non-canonical perspectives, e.g. by describing certain texts as essays which so far have not been subsumed under this label. Yet the compilation could have tackled the diverse fields it seeks to cover in a more representative manner.

In a contest about literature's most protean genre, the essay would stand a good chance of winning. It comprises prose, dramatic, and verse forms alike, ranges in length from one to 700 pages or more and deals with topics as different as potato crisps and human understanding. It is therefore hardly surprising that the only consensus among scholars about this genre seems to concern its very indefinability.

Accordingly, the volume *The Essay: Forms and Transformations*, edited by Dorothea Flothow, Markus Oppolzer, and Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, by and large refrains from any attempt to define the genre it deals with (except in Wolfgang G. Müller's highly differentiated contribution "An Elusive Genre?: An Attempt to Define the Essay"). In the volume's last article, Rima Bertašavičiūtė writes that "any definition of the essay will always be situational, with only an *ad hoc* validity" (p. 317). This observation, just like Bertašavičiūtė's suggestion that "instead of trying to catch this 'beast' we may as well evaluate the havoc it has wreaked" (p. 330), seems to be the credo of this edited volume. With its 22 contributions (excluding the book's "Prefatory Note" and "Introduction"), it provides a kaleidoscope of different shapes the essay has assumed throughout time and space (including letters, prefaces,

and the Arabic text forms 'risāla' and 'maqāma'), of its political potential, and of the sociohistorical circumstances which have impacted its genesis.

The volume is divided into four main parts: The six articles of the opening section concentrate on early modern essays, including Francis Bacon's interpretations of mythological fables *The Wisdom of the Ancients* as well as essays by Henry Peacham, Abraham Cowley, and William Temple. The subsequent seven contributions are dedicated to essays from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, including the *Spectator* essays, essays by Margaret Oliphant and Susan Sontag as well as Adorno's famous "The Essay as Form". The third section consists of six investigations of political essays with a focus on "Feminist and Eco-critical Agendas". A selection of three contributions entitled "The Essay in Specific Cultural Contexts" completes the volume with discussions of essays in the Islamic world, Finland, and Lithuania.

It is a merit of the compilation that almost all of its articles shed new light on the essay. Instead of just reverting to classical essays of the Western canon such as Montaigne's or Bacon's *Essays*, many contributors focus on alternative texts and show convincingly why these can be deemed essays, too: For instance, there is no discussion of Francis Bacon's *Essays* but instead of his *The Wisdom of the Ancients*, and the article about John Dryden does not feature his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* but the prefaces to his plays. Furthermore, largely forgotten essayists such as James Howell or Margaret Oliphant are being allocated the same space as more canonical essayists like George Orwell and are thereby brought back to our attention. When usual suspects are dealt with, they are often approached from an original stance, e.g. by Danica Malekova, who explores the conceptual metaphors used in Margaret Atwood's environmental essays, or by Mehmet Büyüktuncay, who comes up with a very lucid and astute reading of the role which the essay plays in Adorno's aesthetic theory. The same holds true for Veli-Matti Pynttäre and Rima Bertašavičiūtė, who tie Finish and Lithuanian essays to the sociohistorical contexts in which they emerged and thereby provide highly enlightening analyses of the circumstances in which essays can flourish. This huge variety of topics and approaches certainly results not least from the diversity of the contributors, which features a wide range of cultural backgrounds and academic traditions.

Some problems with the collection arise on the side of the editing. In their "Introduction", Dorothea Flothow and Markus Oppolzer write that "excellent studies on the essay undoubtedly exist. Yet many of these [...], rather than covering the genre broadly, confine themselves to very specific aspects of the essay" (p. xiii). Hence, the editors write that the purpose of their own collection is to testify "to the many research opportunities opened by the essay – primarily in literary and cultural studies, but also for linguists, philosophers and many other disciplines" (p. xiv). While the collection does indeed

display a striking array of possible approaches to the essay, the appearance of the eclectic and arbitrary also clings to it: Even though the study sets out to be comparatist, 18 of its 22 contributions focus on Anglophone essays. This is not the only instance where the compilation could have followed its own claim to pluralism more consistently: Although it is laudable that one of the volume's emphases lies on the political dimension of the essay and its "great potential [...] as a genre that gives a voice to less privileged social groups" (p. xv), it is unfortunate that all six articles in the corresponding section concentrate on the essay's connections to feminism and ecocriticism. While the relevance of these two nexuses is indisputable, discussions of the essay's ties with the LGBTQ+-community or the Disability rights movement would have enriched the volume more than the inclusion of two contributions on Margaret Atwood's ecological essays. An article about the equally significant role of essays in post-colonialism, which is touched upon in Suhasini Vincent's discussion of Arundhati Roy's political essays, would have provided an equally valuable addition to the volume.

Considering the huge range of topics and authors the contributions cover, an index would have benefited the volume immensely. A discussion of György Lukács's reflections on the essay, for example, is to be found hidden in Gulshan R. Taneja's chapter on Susan Sontag. Apart from that, the book should have undergone a more thorough copyediting process to get rid of misspellings such as György "Lucaks" (p. xviii) and "Barrack Obama" (p. 285), or a blending which turns John Mowitt and Joel Haefner into "John Mowitt Haefner" (p. 318) as well as a predating of Francis Bacon's death from 1626 to 1621 (p. 304) and of Mary Wollstonecraft's birth from 1759 to 1754 (p. 223).

It can be concluded that the volume is not a place to go to for those who seek an introduction to the essay or wish to read up on specific aspects of the genre. For such concerns, the book presupposes too much knowledge and is too unsystematic in its rendering of information on the genre. Yet, the publication's impressive range of alternative approaches to the essay will certainly inspire those who wish to extend the boundaries of their own understanding of the genre or of 'essay studies' in general.

**German Abstract:**

**Eine Geschichte des Essays und seiner Verwüstungen**

Anstatt auf eine einheitliche Definition oder Darstellung des Essaygenres abzielen, besteht das Hauptziel dieses Bandes darin, einige der sehr unterschiedlichen Formen und Transformationen in den Blick zu nehmen, in denen der Essay im Laufe verschiedener Epochen in unterschiedlichen Kulturen aufgetreten ist. Dabei gelingt es den meisten Beiträgen, mit sehr aufschlussreichen Einblicken in den Essay aufzuwarten und das Genre von alternativen, nicht-kanonischen Perspektiven aus zu beleuchten, z.B. wenn auch solche Texte als Essays gefasst werden, die traditionellerweise nicht unter diesen Gattungsbegriff fallen. Der Band als Ganzer hätte dabei jedoch klarer und übersichtlicher strukturiert werden können.

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