

The Essay: Present Histories, Present Futures **(REGISTRATION OPEN)**

Announcement published by Mario Aquilina on Tuesday, July 24, 2018

Type:

Conference

Date:

April 11, 2019 to April 13, 2019

Location:

Malta

Subject Fields:

Literature, American History / Studies, Composition & Rhetoric, Humanities, Journalism and Media Studies

Registration for *The Essay: Present Histories, Present Futures* Conference, to be held in Malta between the 11th and the 13th of April 2019, is now open, and can be accessed [here](#).

Original Conference Description

The essay has turned and returned. Again. In having done this, it has reignited interest not only in its present state (what is the essay, today?) but also in its histories (what has it been?) and its futures (what will it become?).

The essay has always been a form that is averse to simple definition, taking elements from other discourses and reinventing itself continuously, while at the same time retaining something which makes it recognisable as 'essay'. If there is what may be described as a tradition of the essay, it is conceived differently at different points in time and is exemplified by texts that may be personal or impersonal; formal or informal; fragmented or structured; embracing doubt or opinionated; extremely short or as long as a novel; poetic or pedestrian; humorous or deadly serious; and anything else in between these and several other characteristics.

This fluidity remains today with the essay being variously associated with the lyrical, the theoretical, the journalistic, the visual, the critical. With the multimodal realities of our times, one would expect this heterogeneity to intensify even further.

Over the last thirty years, the essay has flourished, despite having repeatedly been described as dead, or as approaching its demise – Michael Hamburger, for instance, spoke for many when he declared that 'the essay ha[d] been a dead genre' since G. K. Chesterton and Virginia Woolf ('An Essay on the Essay' (1975)). It has made a notable return not only in numerous successful anthologies that canonize chosen examples from its history (John Gross ed. (1991); Philip Lopate ed. (1995); John D'Agata ed. (2009); Robert Atwan and Joyce Carol Oates gen. eds. (1986–2017)), but also in influential new collections by contemporary essayists like Annie Dillard, Lisa Robertson, Joan Didion, Susan Howe, Claudia Rankine,

Rebecca Solnit, Brian Dillon, and Eula Biss, among many others.

However, it can also be said that, as Klaus and Stuckey-French put it, notwithstanding the recent 'extraordinary growth of interest [...], the essay has largely been ignored in the world of criticism and theory' (2012, p. xi). Often thought of as part of a fourth genre whose relation to literature is primarily that of providing a thinking space about literature, the essay has not benefitted from the critical attention devoted to the central genres of literature, even though prominent essayists have often been literary figures like Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Borges, D. H. Lawrence, and Orwell.

In spite of this relative paucity of critical interest in the essay, essayists have always written about the essay, and it is indeed a primary characteristic of the form to be introspective. Montaigne, for instance, does not only provide us with the first modern 'essais' (trial, attempts) that conceive of themselves as such, he also formulates what would become the often repeated conception of the essay as a form marked by the roaming of 'style' and a 'mind' exploring itself. Montaigne sets the tone for many others who think of the essay in terms of a peculiar combination of experimentation, reflection and an apparent looseness of form so that, ironically, the most common definition of the form is that it escapes definition. Adorno writes: 'As the essay denies any primeval givens, so it refuses any definition of its concepts. [It] proceeds, so to speak, methodically unmethodically'. Or, for Chesterton, the essay 'is full of the future and the praise of experiment and adventure'.

This ironic tension at the heart of the essay – its being defined by its indefinability and its questioning of generic norms – may partly explain why it has been declared dead and revived so often in its history. It is a form that singularly combines modes, tones, and styles that recur through time (what may be called the essayistic) with a fundamental, foundational, and continuous questioning of itself as a genre. William Carlos Williams captures some of this tension when he writes that 'whatever passes through it [the essay], it is never that thing. It remains itself and continues so, pure motion'.

This conference positions itself within this ironic tension as it seeks to explore, on the one hand, what may be described as the writing of the history of the essay as a genre and, on the other hand, that which Duplessis calls its 'volatile incipience' or what Starobinski describes as the 'inchoative aspect of the essay'.

Proposals Received:

We have received and accepted abstracts from prominent scholars of the essay as well as essayists from around the world. The conference will feature an eclectic range of topics, including: the theory of the essay; the poetics of the essay; the history of the essay; genre studies; the rhetoric of the essay; literary journalism; the contemporary essay; the lyric essay; the familiar essay; the Romantic essay; the cross-over essay; the travel essay; the urban essay; the film essay; the queer essay; the transgender essay; the Native American essay; the photo essay; the theatre essay; the essay's relation to philosophy; the essay and the novelistic tradition; the essay in the environmental

humanities; style, voice and tone in the essay; empathy and the essay; the essay and national cultures; experimentation in the essay; pedagogies of the essay, and many more. Some of the essayists featured in the accepted proposals are: Biss, Chesterton, D'Agata, Defoe, Didion, Emerson, Hazlitt, Huxley, Lamb, Lee, Ortega y Gasset, Orlean, Ozick, Rankine, Sidney, Stevens, Stevenson, Theroux, Vonnegut, von Scirah, and Wilde.

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