

Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy, eds., *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 400 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-870786-8

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Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy's *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present* is a collection that brings together seventeen scholarly contributions on the essay as a form. As the editors acknowledge, the twenty-first century has seen a revival of interest in the essay and non-fictional genres. *On Essays* is the most recent among a series of forthcoming companions and histories such as *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*, *The Cambridge Companion to the Essay*, *The Cambridge History of the American Essay* and *The Cambridge History of the British Essay*.

Working with the essay implies having to tackle the "long history of problems" that the definition of the object has and this collection well reflects the polyvalent and protean nature of this form by providing many angles from which to gain more knowledge on its long tradition. The introduction, co-written by the editors Karshan and Murphy, reflexively begins by stating the paradoxical unnecessary of introductions, resuming Theodor Adorno's well known phrase: "[the essay] starts [...] with what it wants to talk about; it says what occurs to it in that context and stops when it feels finished rather than when there is nothing to say" (Adorno, "The Essay as Form", cit. in *On Essays*, 1). Yet the co-editors manage to provide a very complete introduction to the collection and to the essay as a form by making use of the essay's own tropes. For example, the choice of the title *On Essays*, as well as the titles of the subsections in the introduction follows "the essay's own titular habit, which implies at once its tendency to be *about* something, to have in view something which is its subject; while at the same time incorporating an awareness of the writer's intentionality, the taking up of an angle, rather than a claim to definitiveness or completion" (19). The editors provide key information on the essay's tendency towards self-reflexivity; they present the etymology of the word *essai* by recalling how it has been noticed that using this type of evidence may be considered a cliché in essays on the essay, which are often those providing the richest insights. They also focus on reading, which is central to essay writing. Montaigne's essays, for instance, are imbued with his readings of classical authors to whom the history of the essay can be retraced – as the anthologies *The Art of the Personal Essay* (1994) edited by Philip Lopate and *Lost Origins of the Essay* (2009) edited by John D'Agata testify. As Karshan and Murphy mention these two and other influential collections and works, they illuminate another key aspect of the approach to this complex object of study: the existence of a number of curated anthologies makes their respective introductions part of a solid body of theoretical work on the essay. For the editors, the most substantial history of the English essay is still Hugh Walker's *The English Essay and Essayists* (1915). They also discuss more recent contributions, noticing how they are either arranged by topic or by historical period.

Differently from other collections on the topic, Karshan and Murphy's follows the chronology of the essayists on which each chapter focuses, with the exception of the first two chapters, which serve as further introductions. In Karshan's "What is an Essay? Thirteen Answers from Virginia Woolf" (31-54), "Street Haunting", in which Woolf concentrates on the history of the essay and its themes by way of the essay itself, is used as a map to guide the reader and illustrate some of the characteristics of the essay. The second chapter, by Warren Boutcher, is instead dedicated to "The Montaignian Essay and Authored Miscellanies from Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century" (55-77). Reading the works of the critic Isaac D'Israeli (1766-1848), Boutcher argues that contemporary criticism has lost the perception of the fact that the essay was embedded in the broader tradition of "heterogeneous, occasional, spontaneous, irregular [...] writing attributable to a single, authorial 'Miscellanist'" (59) that preceded, included and then followed Montaigne.

The chronology begins with Montaigne and the relevance of experience (Kathryn Murphy, “Of Sticks and Stones: The Essay, Experience, and Experiment”, 78-96) to then move to the eighteenth century – when the papers published on *The Spectator* became the most prominent examples of English essays (Markman Ellis, “Time and the Essay: The Spectator and Diurnal Form”, 97-113). Other interesting contributions deal with the philosophical essays by David Hume (Fred Parker, “The Sociable Philosopher: David Hume and the Philosophical Essay”, 114-131), and with the essayistic features of Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (Scott Black, “Tristram Shandy, Essayist”, 132-149). The collection then touches on the Victorian age with Bharat Tandon’s “‘Strips of Essayism’: Eliot, Hardy, and the Victorian Periodical Essay” (258-276) to then focus on the more contemporary twentieth century with Michael Wood’s essay exploring the contaminations of the essay in the novel after Borges (Michael Wood, “Rational Distorsions: Essayism in the British Novel after Borges”, 277-292). The chapter “Creative Non-Fiction and the Lyric Essay: The American Essay in the Twenty-First Century” (293-312) by the late Ned Stuckey-French focuses on the American lyrical essays of writers such as Eula Biss and Claudia Rankine, ascribing its emergence within the broader context of creative nonfiction, in the late nineties, to John D’Agata. Worth of mention is also the last chapter by Christy Wampole, “Dali’s Montaigne: Essay Hybrids and Surrealist Practice” (323-347), which is on the “conjunction of image and text in essayistic hybrids such as the photo essay, essay-film, and video essay and explores the possibilities of estrangement [...] that emerge from the encounter between visual and verbal expression” (323).

Despite embracing a broad chronological range, the collection manages to give the reader more than just a taste of the complexity of the essay. The choice of different approaches and perspectives, from broader analyses of cultural and literary phenomena to chapters focused on one essayist, is an added value of this collection. While it is certainly not intended to be a handbook, the attentive reader will be able to retrace the history of the genre in it. Each chapter, in fact, is both a specialised account of the individual topic, and a study on the essay more in general. Overall, this collection is precious to researchers who aim to specialise on the essay, providing a great starting point for the beginners in the study of the essay and essay writing while also being stimulating to those who are more familiar with the genre.