Preface to a History in the Manner of an Essay

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Let's begin with a proposition. *The Cambridge History of the British Essay*, in forty-seven substantive and original chapters, provides the first major history of the essay form in English. It deploys both wide-angle and telescopic lenses to survey that history, from the deep roots of the essay in classical tradition through its proliferation in today's digital media.[1] While there are forms of Anglo-American essayism relevant to that prolonged history, it is worth noting that a separate volume in the Cambridge History series, published contemporaneously with this one, is dedicated to the essay in an American context.[2] Of course, since we are living in an era of global connectivity (if not connection), such distinctions may seem irrelevant. Yet over the past six centuries, a tradition of the British essay has evolved in reviewing, travel writing, history, biography, political theory, spiritual autobiography, and many other modalities inherent to the essay that extended its reach as a flexible and multivalent form long before the emergence of the Internet.

That tradition includes colonial and postcolonial manifestations of the essay that deserve attention, both as extensions of the British imperial enterprise and as internal forms of subversion and resistance to it.[3] The familiar voices of Francis Bacon, Richard Steele, Joseph Addison, Samuel Johnson, William Hazlitt, Thomas De Quincey, Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, Virginia Woolf, and other canonical staples are resituated here in the context of other voices that have long gone missing. Such voices emerge in

[1] On the former, see H. Power, 'Ancient influences on the essay' (Ch. 1) and on the latter, J. Pugh, 'Blogging in Britain: essays in the digital age' (Ch. 46).

[2] On the American connection, see P. Coleman, 'Transatlantic essayism' (Ch. 38), and on the educational legacies of the essay in the United States, J. Klancher, 'The academic essay: rhetoric and pedagogy' (Ch. 21). *The Cambridge History of the American Essay* is edited by Christy Wampole and Jason Childs.

[3] Priti Joshi makes this argument with respect to the English-language essay in India in Ch. 31, 'Grist for the mill: history and the essay in India, 1870–1920', as does Jeanne-Marie Jackson in Ch. 32, 'The African Gold Coast essay: straddling fact and prophecy'.

the angry rhetoric of pamphlets by women essayists in the early modern period, in the resolves and sermons of seventeenth-century divines, in the school themes that have been all too quickly crumpled up and buried in time, in the newspaper columns of Chartists and radicals striving for political reform, in the publications of the New Woman, in the periodical networks of African Gold Coast intellectuals, in the creative non-fiction of postcolonial subjects, in the memoirs of Irish Traveller people, and in essayistic responses to geopolitical crises and the spectre of ecological apocalypse.[4] Our purpose in this preface is to give a few pointers, not a detailed map of what is, after all, quite a hefty volume. A map of sorts is provided in the two appendices of essayists mentioned in this volume, the first alphabetical and the second chronological. But if its name is any indication, the essay lives and breathes through exploration.

While not exactly a 'preface essay' as Mario Aquilina defines it in Chapter 29 of this volume, our preface does have essayistic aspirations to remain brief and conversable, despite the larger arsenal of rhetorical, didactic, scholarly, analytical, polemical, and even propagandist strategies available to the essayist, as one finds elaborated in the chapters of this volume.[5] What we would like to stress above all is the *associative* nature of the essay. Such association may operate as an internal structuring mechanism, as in the form of the literary essay derived from Montaigne, but it is likewise a generic feature linking the essay to other literary forms. Among those elaborated in this volume are the associations the essay has with the novel, the commonplace book, the miscellany, the school theme, the preface, the review, the newspaper leader, the letter, the diary, the political tract, the conduct manual, the travel journal, the philosophical treatise, the reverie, the gastronomical effusion, the verse essay, the memoir, the blog, and the cine-essay.[6]

[4] See, respectively, M. Emre, 'Anger, rhetoric, and early women essayists (Ch. 6); K. Murphy, 'Surprised into form: the beginnings of the English essay' (Ch. 2); N. Reisner, 'The sermon and the essay' (Ch. 5); T. Karshan, 'The essay and the theme' (Ch. 20); G. Vargo, 'The essay in the age of Chartism' (Ch. 26); R. Rainof, 'A room of one's own: the New Woman and the essay' (Ch. 34); Jackson, 'The African Gold Coast essay: straddling fact and prophecy'; S. Majumdar, 'After empire: postcolonialism and the essay' (Ch. 41); P. Reynolds, 'Performance and the Irish essay' (Ch. 42); R. Kerridge, 'The essay, ecocriticism, and the Anthropocene' (Ch. 47); and B. Schaff, 'A brief history of travel and the essay' (Ch. 30).

[5] M. Aquilina, 'The preface essay' (Ch. 29).

[6] See, following the sequence above, J. Davidson, 'The essay and the rise of the novel' (Ch. 13); A. Vine, 'Miscellanies, commonplace books, and the essay' (Ch. 3); Karshan, 'The essay and the theme'; Aquilina, 'The preface essay'; R. Morrison, 'Nineteenth-century reviews reviewed' (Ch. 24); J. Shattock, 'Essays in the "Golden Age" of the British newspaper' (Ch. 25); E.T. Bannet, 'Between public and private: letters, diaries, essays' (Ch. 8); A.B. Bricker and M. Nicosia, 'The polemical essay in pamphlets, newsbooks, and periodicals'

The essay may present itself in the shape of verse under the title of an essay, or it may pass by other names in the form of a de facto essay. It may be plucked from a longer text and collected in a book of essays, or it may appear serially in the more ephemeral form of a periodical. It may adopt a tone that is vituperative and satiric, or comforting in avuncular wisdom. Its voice may be strident in the face of injustice, or soporific (at times) in high seriousness. It may appear light and portable to be read on a plane, or ponderous and unsociable like a tortoise tucked away under an old motley cover. Whatever totality one makes of it, the essay generically seems predisposed to expose its own contrary – to turn itself inside out like the rebellious child of literary history that it is and resist the very habits of classification that define its Enlightened parent. It may display inherited patterns of the species, but its vitality lies in its unpredictability: if the essay is anything, it is protean in its attempt to be.[7]

Given these conditions, any effort to plug any gaps and assay, systematically, to introduce *The Cambridge History of the British Essay* as an airtight vessel of historical continuity would be worse than absurd: it would be an act of cowardice aimed to fend off criticism. Yet criticism, as this volume makes clear, is an important part of the essay tradition.[8] Rather than attempting to steer clear of it, let us take the first step here by saying that, had we chosen to replace the voice of Laura Marcus, Professor of English at New College, Oxford, whose untimely death took place during the composition of this volume, we might have had a chapter on the autobiographical essay, or the essay as life writing. Life sometimes writes itself in unexpected chapters,

(Ch. 7); and B. Schultz, 'Political theory and ethics in the Victorian era' (Ch. 27). On the conduct manual: D. Gigante, 'On books: the bibliographical essay' (Ch. 15). On the travel journal: Schaff, 'A brief history of travel and the essay'. On the philosophical treatise: T. Milnes, 'Incoherence brought to order: empiricism and the essay' (Ch. 4) and E. Plunkett, 'Plain English: essays and analytic philosophy' (Ch. 28). On the reverie: M. Russett, 'Forms of thought: dreams, reverie, and the essay' (Ch. 18). On the gastronomical effusion: A.L. Tigner, 'Food and the essay' (Ch. 17). On the verse essay: J. Sider Jost, 'The art of criticism: essay as citation' (Ch. 9) and M. Wood, 'Undiplomatic relations: modernism and the essay' (Ch. 36). On the memoir: Reynolds, 'Performance and the Irish essay' and Majumdar, 'After empire'. On the blog: Pugh, 'Blogging in Britain'. And on the cine-essay: K. Wittman, 'Of human suffering: the essay and ekphrasis' (Ch. 40).

[7] Following this idea, see *The Essay: An Attempt, a Protean Form*, my edited collection (forum) in *Republics of Letters*, 4:1 (2014), https://arcade.stanford.edu/rofl/fora/essay-attempt-protean-form (accessed 5 August 2023).

[8] See, e.g., Sider Jost, 'The art of criticism'; J. Camlot, 'Victorian essays in criticism' (Ch. 23); and on the network of critical reviewing, M.P. Eve, 'The essay in the career of the contemporary British novelist' (Ch. 45).

which, in this case, we have chosen to let stand as a speaking absence representing so many losses that took place during the Covid pandemic.

From the chasm of loss, however, life sometimes springs, and as Saikat Majumdar remarks: 'The tradition of life writing is essential to the postcolonial essay in English, as becomes evident with some of its most exciting exponents from different parts of the former British Empire', whose autobiographical essayism his chapter proceeds to explore.[9] In another context, Kevin Brazil shows how life writing is an important part of the art criticism of Virginia Woolf and Vernon Lee,[10] whose essays are treated elsewhere in this volume in different contexts: of the New Woman movement (Rebecca Rainof, Chapter 34); of politics and propaganda surrounding the First World War (Rachel Baldacchino, Chapter 35); and of modernism (Michael Wood, Chapter 36). Eve Tavor Bannet discusses the autobiographical performance of selfhood in early British essays and letters, and Paige Reynolds does the same for the contemporary Irish essay. Uttara Natarajan sounds the 'familiar' voices of autobiographical urban essayists of the Romantic era, while Eric Tippin treats the ironies of life writing in the short-form essay as it developed between 1870 and 1920, as in G.K. Chesterton's 'A Piece of Chalk'. In an exciting intervention, David Russell discusses the role of life writing in the early days of psychoanalysis.[11]

Essays, autobiographical and otherwise, often incorporate idiosyncratic aspects of life and, had we the eidolon of an eighteenth-century essayist, we might here say a word about cats. More specifically, about one cat named Christabel whom we might – unfairly but truthfully – blame for the loss of a chapter on the character-essay. She did not eat it. Nor can we (strictly speaking) hold her accountable for the fact that it never materialised. But it is worth noting that Sir Thomas Overbury, author of a series of 'characters' from 1614, did not like cats. And that, while Nicholas Breton considered dedicating his *Characters vpon Essaies, Morall and Diuine* (1615) to his cat, he instead chose Francis Bacon for a muse: 'Worthy knight, I have read of many essays, and a kind of charactering of them, by such, as when I looked unto the form, or nature of their writing, I have been of the conceit that they were but imitators of your breaking the ice to their inventions.'[12] Whether Breton

[9] Majumdar, 'After empire'. [10] K. Brazil, 'The eye and the I: essay and image' (Ch. 39).
[11] Bannet, 'Between public and private'; Reynolds, 'Performance and the Irish essay'; E. Tippin, 'The short essay in context, 1870–1920' (Ch. 33); D. Russell, 'Feeling real: psychoanalysis and the essay' (Ch. 37).
[12] N. Breton, *Characters vpon Essaies, Morall and Diuine written for those good Spirits, that will take them in good part, and make vse of them to good purpose* (London: J. Gwillim, 1615), sigs. A3–4. I have modernised the text for fluency of reading.

would have placed John Earle, author of *Essays and Characters* (1628), among the imitators of Bacon, we, who have not studied the matter, cannot say. We must leave the character essayists swimming in cold waters beneath the 'broken ice' until someone, perhaps you, dear reader, decides to *go fish*.[13] In the meantime, let us leave the last word on this subject to Leigh Hunt, who opens one essay in a deviously noncommittal manner: 'A blazing fire, a warm rug, candles lit and curtains drawn, the kettle on for tea . . . and finally, the cat before you, attracting your attention, – it is a scene which everybody likes, unless he has a morbid aversion to cats; which is not common.'[14] But those words, from 'The Cat by the Fire' (1834), do not contain the *last* word. For that, we turn instead to an earlier essay by Hunt, 'A Day by the Fire' (1811), which opens: 'I am one of those that delight in a fireside, and can enjoy it without even the help of a cat or a tea-kettle. To cats, indeed, I have an aversion.'[15]

A chapter on animals (it occurs to us now) would indeed have sat nicely in this history of the essay. Alas, we cannot offer that, though the interested reader may discover the fate of animals in the ecocritical essay. For the last chapter of this volume, Richard Kerridge's 'The Essay, Ecocriticism, and the Anthropocene', contains some animal remains: a beached whale with one eye plucked out, a rotting lamb disembowelled by buzzards, the skull of a gannet, and some rabbit bones. More appetising, although less *searing*, we can also offer Amy L. Tigner's chapter, 'Food and the Essay' (Chapter 17). What *not* to eat, on the other hand, we learn from John Strachan's chapter 'Satire and the Essay' (Chapter 16), which discusses Jonathan Swift's 'Modest Proposal' as a model for later British essayists, who ravenously gobbled it up and spat it out in similar, bite-sized chunks of satire. Thanks to our cat, we have digressed, through animals, from essays to food, but at least we have Natalie M. Phillips and Sydney Logsdon to remind us that distraction has always been a key feature of the essay.[16] Still, to the point: thematic chapters like the ones named above challenge the ostensibly chronological order of this volume. Consider, as yet another example, Barbara Schaff's chapter 'A Brief History of Travel and the Essay' (Chapter 30), which begins with

[13] In Ch. 2 of this volume, 'Surprised into form', Kathryn Murphy discusses, briefly, Richard Flecknoe's *Characters, Made at Several Times and on Several Occasions* (1673). For those more interested in card games than fishing, however, we recommend 'Mrs. Battle's opinions on whist' (1821) by Charles Lamb.

[14] L. Hunt, 'The cat by the fire', *Leigh Hunt's London Journal*, no. 35 (26 November 1834), 273.

[15] L. Hunt, 'A day by the fire', *The Reflector*, 2 (1811), 400.

[16] See N.M. Phillips and S. Logsdon, 'Loose sallies of the mind: distraction and the essay' (Ch. 12).

Bacon's 1594 essay 'Of Travel' addressed to young Englishmen on the Grand Tour and winds up in 2021, with Taran N. Khan, listening to 'other' voices in the capital of war-torn Afghanistan. Let us simply conclude that while a historiographical spine structures this volume, its organisational vagaries may be as interesting – indeed as necessary to life – as variants in nature.

Overall, the five sections of *The Cambridge History of the British Essay* are intended to retain a forward movement through time while highlighting patterns that emerge in the essay's long march toward futurity. In brief, these five sections address: (1) the formation of the British essay tradition in the early modern period; (2) its development through essay periodicals, clubs, coffeehouses, and other aspects of eighteenth-century culture;[17] (3) the morphing of the essay in the nineteenth century to serve the purposes of education,[18] cultural identity, and moral and political reform; (4) the fragmentation of identities, individual as well as communal, through such phenomena as decolonialisation, the traumas of World War, the articulation of feminism by the New Woman, the emergence of psychoanalysis, and the increasingly frenetic pace of life in modernity; and (5) contemporary engagements with the essay form through film and photography, literary theory,[19] public intellectualism, postcolonial subjectivity, performative identity, ecological consciousness, and digital media, from blogs to Substack newsletters. And now, we might add ChatGPT, a platform deploying artificial intelligence to enable computers to write essays in response to prompts – a new twist in the history of the essay that has some wondering: 'Will ChatGPT Kill the Student Essay?'[20]

More than 600 years of changing media and historical circumstance, however, have proven the resilience and adaptability of the essay. We hear its diverse sounds and styles ranging from plain to polemical, from didactic to dreamlike, and from contrarian to sublime. We can almost smell its

[17] To highlight a few of those aspects here: J.R. Wood, 'Essayistic personae and personhood' (Ch. 10); J. Mee and J. Buckley, 'Clubs and coffeehouses: sociability and the essay' (Ch. 11); P. Keen, 'The periodical essay and the rise of literary professionalism' (Ch. 14).

[18] Among other chapters previously mentioned, see A. Lawrie, 'The essay and the rise of university English' (Ch. 22).

[19] Here we point the reader to R. McDonald, 'Essayism in literary theory' (Ch. 44).

[20] I. Dumitrescu, 'Will ChatGPT kill the student essay?', *The Walrus* (24 March 2023), https://thewalrus.ca/chatgpt-writing/; see too, S. Johnson, 'A.I. is mastering language: should we trust what it says?' *New York Times Magazine* (15 April 2022), www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/magazine/ai-language.html; and F. Manjoo, 'How do you know a human wrote this?', *New York Times* (29 July 2022), www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/opinion/gpt-3-ai-automation.html (all accessed 5 August 2023). My thanks to Amanda Olson for fruitful discussion on this topic.

purposes – its subtleties and subversions – whether political or moral, utilitarian, evangelical or aestheticist. Often, we get a taste of an argumentative structure building, only to find it circling back, teasing us out of teleology into more recursive patterns of thought. Essays touch us too, often with that quality Hazlitt called *gusto*, an intense form of aesthetic experience involving more than one mode of sensation.[21] The essay, in short, is a dynamic form in which some of the brightest minds of our generation – and others – have attempted to speak of what seems most essential. One thinks of George Orwell and the New Orwellians – generations apart yet determined to say something meaningful as the condition for speaking at all.[22] At the same time, the essay, to borrow the etymology of the term from Montaigne as 'an attempt' or 'trial', belies the profound human stakes involved in any such attempt. The chapters of this book together are themselves an attempt – the first, perhaps, but likely not the last – to glimpse the future through the past of the essay in English.

[21] Hazlitt's essay 'On gusto' first appeared in 'The Round Table' series in Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* on 26 May 1816.
[22] As discussed by Peter Marks in 'The essay and the public intellectual' (Ch. 43).