

1995

Essayism

Robert Atwan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Atwan, Robert. "Essayism." *The Iowa Review* 25.2 (1995): 6-14. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4358>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Essayism · Robert Atwan

HISTORIES OF THE ESSAY are usually constructed along two different lines. The most straightforward approach observes the development of the genre as it passes through its major practitioners—Montaigne, Bacon, Addison, Johnson, Emerson, Woolf, and so forth. The other studies the genre's evolving forms—personal, formal, critical, journalistic, mosaic. I want here, however, to look at the essay in an altogether different way, not as a separate genre represented by a number of important works that we call “essays,” but rather as a genre operating within the genres, one that has since the Renaissance continuously permeated and shaped what we normally think of as imaginative literature. In this history of the essay, Fielding, who was proud of the way he had interlaced the periodical essay into his fiction, has as much to contribute as does Addison. There is no term that I know of that conveniently describes the pervasive presence of the essay within other genres, its “intrageneric” character. We might refer to the “interpolated essay” or the “embedded essay,” or, to borrow a term from M. M. Bakhtin, the “inserted” essay as a way to describe the type of essay that appears as a freestanding chapter of a novel or that is sometimes so impacted within the fiction that we can't be sure whether we're reading an essay or a story.

Imaginative literature is so crammed with the presence of such essays that I shall borrow a descriptive term from imaginative literature itself. The term is “essayism” and the source is Robert Musil's remarkable novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, which appeared in Germany between 1930 and 1933. In one of the novel's many digressive chapters, its protagonist, Ulrich, “pays homage to the Utopian idea of Essayism,” an intellectual attitude that he associates “with the peculiar concept of the essay,” which “in the sequence of its paragraphs, takes a thing from many sides without comprehending it wholly.” Though Musil employs the term specifically to describe the state of mind of a particular character, the chapter makes it clear that “essayism” (*Essayismus*) is also a description of Musil's aesthetic intentions: “There was something in Ulrich's nature that worked in a haphazard, paralysing, disarming manner against logical systematisation, against the one-track will, against the definitely directed urges of ambition. . . .” What would happen, Musil must have wondered, if I create a

fictional hero whose unique mental equipment keeps him in a perpetual state of inaction and indirection, and if I then place him inside a busy, accelerating narrative that continually demands progressive movement and activity? What Musil achieved is one of the great modern books: a novel—like Proust’s—with an essayist at its center, a fiction continually at odds with its own narrative process.

Musil was not the first to use the word, however, though he gives it its most extensive theoretical treatment. The term *essayism* first appears in English (according to the *O.E.D.*) in 1821, where it is used pejoratively; but by 1877 the *Saturday Review* employs it in a context appropriate to Musil’s (and my own) use of the term: a reviewer writes of “That mysterious literary essence known as *essayism* that pervades all literature.” A history of *essayism*—as opposed to that of the *essay*—would include a large number of imaginative works of literature in which the *essay* or various *essayistic* styles of discourse are wholly dominant or at least so pervasive that they are difficult to ignore. In these works the authors are (like Fielding in *Tom Jones*) either consciously writing *essays* that could more or less stand alone or they are (like Melville in “*Bartelby, the Scrivener*”) adopting a recognizable *essayistic* stance in relation to fictive material. In the only systematic study of the term that I know of in English, Thomas Harrison examines the role of “*essayism*” (though he does so largely in the context of moral philosophy) in the work of Joseph Conrad, Robert Musil, and Luigi Pirandello.

The history of *essayism* is inseparable from what we customarily think of as imaginative literature. I would further maintain that—for much of imaginative literature—an understanding of *essayism* is indispensable to a full critical assessment of the work. “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so,” argues Denmark’s brooding Prince. And Melville aptly notes in the margin of his Shakespeare: “Here is forcibly shown the great Montaigneism of Hamlet.” Though no one need consider Shakespeare’s great tragedy as a dramatized *essay*, Hamlet’s mind undeniably works in an *essayistic* fashion. In speech after speech, we can hear Shakespeare responding to Montaigne’s newly-formed genre; in more belletristic times, many of Hamlet’s speeches were set into prose and separately printed as Baconian mini-*essays*, perhaps helping to reinforce the notion that an *essayist* like Bacon must have written the plays. Even Polonius’s adage-ridden language exemplifies the *Essais* in the way that

Shakespeare juxtaposes Hamlet's open and skeptical mental *processes* against the preformulated wisdom of an entrenched aphoristic reasoning.

Hamlet should remind us that many significant works of literature do not exemplify merely one particular genre but are usually made up of an uneasy combination of different genres. In that sense, *Hamlet* can be read as Shakespeare's decision to pit a new essayistic sensibility against the furious confines of classical tragedy; from start to finish, the play provides an awesome inventory of all of the commanding ways that language has entrapped human thought. Shakespeare, we might say, was essaying the essay within his tragedy, and in so doing he provided one of the earliest commentaries on Montaigne's literary creation.

Other imaginative works are far more explicit in their embrace of the essay. In *Tom Jones*, Fielding self-consciously included periodical-style essays in front of each book:

Peradventure there may be no parts in this prodigious work which will give the reader less pleasure in the perusing, than those which have given the author the greatest pains in composing. Among these, probably, may be reckoned those initial essays which we have prefixed to the historical matter contained in every book; and which we have determined to be essentially necessary to this kind of writing. . . .

Fielding offers an interesting, though perhaps duplicitous, reason for these "initial essays." Since essays are more difficult to write than narrative fiction—requiring a "competent knowledge" of history and letters—he argues that their presence in his novel will prohibit lesser talents from slavish imitation. Fielding's prefatory essays were so popular that anthologists sometimes reprinted them separately in essay collections. Throughout the eighteenth century, novelists experimented with various ways of incorporating or assimilating the essay; *Tristram Shandy*, for example, foregrounds one of the essay's most characteristic features—the association of ideas—and does so, as Wolfgang Iser notes in *The Act of Reading*, by "linking up with Lockean empiricism." Sterne's novel can thus be read as an imaginative response to one of the great seventeenth-century philosophical books, Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, a work that itself often nervously moves between the conversational or digressive essay

and the rigorously argued treatise. Neoclassical verse also absorbed the essay as poets delighted in finding poetic outlets for description, exposition, and argument. A favorite Augustan form was the philosophical verse essay; with its roots in Lucretius, it is perhaps best typified by Pope's "Essay on Man."

Since the eighteenth century, many impressive works of literature have creatively assimilated the essay form. Some landmarks of essayism are: Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (introduced by one of American literature's most intriguing autobiographical essays); Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (an imaginative deconstruction of the early nineteenth-century "character sketch"; many of Melville's other "tales" are actually innovative essays); Whitman's "Song of Myself" (which I have argued is an audacious reshaping of the philosophical verse essay); Baudelaire's *The Spleen of Paris* (the essay as "prose poem"); Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (whose narrator's mental processes are almost entirely essayistic); and Borges's *Ficciones* (with its borderless zones of prose). More recently, Milan Kundera has discussed in *The Art of the Novel* the need for an "art of the specifically novelistic essay," the kind, following the essayism of Hermann Broch, he has interwoven into such novels as *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. And in her introduction to the *Best American Poetry 1991*, Jorie Graham observed that a renewed "ambition to reclaim ground for eloquence and rhetoric is . . . starkly visible in the sharp, urgent poems of sheer argument—the lyric essay, which seems to be flourishing, stark offspring of the more classic meditation, also in vogue."

The essayistic elements contained in such works as these are not parasitical or excisable parts; they represent compositional features wholly essential to the author's aesthetic vision. Very often, the essay operates *inside* works of fiction in a conflictual manner that may be read, as in Hawthorne, Melville, or Kundera, as an analogue of other contentions (thematic, psychological, ideological) within the story. Melville, for example, expects us to hear the polite vein of Washington Irving's essays behind the voice of the well-intentioned Wall Street lawyer who tells the sad tale of Bartleby. Melville, in fact, set many of his novels and tales on the borderline of fiction and truth, where he explored the limits of imaginative literature. "Not long ago," he writes in the Preface to *Mardi*, "having published two narratives of voyages in the Pacific, which, in many quarters, were received with incredulity, the thought occurred to me, of indeed writing a romance of

Polynesian adventure, and publishing it as such; to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity. . . .” In “Bartleby,” Melville may be writing fiction but his narrator is composing a biographical sketch. Much of the tale’s fascination depends on the asymmetric relation of these two genres.

To illustrate how deeply submerged the essay might be within a work of imaginative literature, I want to turn to a famous story whose essayistic qualities might at first seem invisible. Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River” appears to be a short story, pure and simple. Yet, what makes this piece of highly rhetorical prose a story? Only the use of third-person narration, perhaps. Put into the first person, the story would be practically indistinguishable from a familiar essay (all too familiar) about a solitary fishing trip: the writer hops off a train, observes the burned-down town he once knew, hikes through the countryside, pitches camp, pan fries himself an appetizing meal of canned beans, spaghetti, and ketchup, crawls into his tent, gets a good night’s sleep, and the next day wades into the river, catches two trout (after the proverbial big one gets away), and decides to return to camp. That is what “happens” in “Big Two-Hearted River.” There is no cumulative action other than setting up camp and fishing, and no dialogue other than the few things Nick says to himself or to the blighted grasshoppers.

Whatever we might find conventionally fictional in “Big Two-Hearted River” is precisely what Hemingway leaves out of the story—the details of how Seney became a waste land, of why Nick returns to fish there, of why he feels a need for renewal (my terms, of course, are meant to echo T. S. Eliot’s own mytho-poetic response to the First World War). Hemingway’s story offers little drama, no conclusive epiphany, and, though the world rendered is so insistently private, there is remarkably little reflection on the part of the main (the only) character. But the little reflection that does occur is crucial to the tale. As Nick makes himself a pot of coffee, he remembers an old friend with whom he used to argue about the proper way to brew coffee. He makes it the way Hopkins insisted and, as he drinks the coffee, it provokes (in Proustian fashion) a train of associations that take him back to an earlier fishing trip and happier days. “That was a long time ago,” Nick recalls:

Hopkins spoke without moving his lips. He had played polo. He made millions of dollars in Texas. He had borrowed carfare to go to Chicago, when the wire came that his first big well had come in. He could have wired for money. That would have been too slow. They called Hop's girl the Blonde Venus. Hop did not mind because she was not his real girl. Hopkins said very confidently that none of them would make fun of his real girl. He was right. Hopkins went away when the telegram came. That was on the Black River. It took eight days for the telegram to reach him. Hopkins gave away his .22 caliber Colt automatic pistol to Nick. He gave his camera to Bill. It was to remember him always by. They were all going fishing again next summer. The Hop Head was rich. He would get a yacht and they would all cruise along the north shore of Lake Superior. He was excited but serious. They said good-bye and all felt bad. It broke up the trip. They never saw Hopkins again. That was a long time ago on the Black River.

This momentary flood of memories, despite its interrupted narrative sequence, represents—with its reverberations of popular “strike-it-rich” tales—the only conventional fiction in “Big Two-Hearted River.” We even see the memories start to evolve as a short story: “Nick drank,” the passage continues,

the coffee according to Hopkins. The coffee was bitter. Nick laughed. It made a good ending to the story. His mind was starting to work. He knew he could choke it because he was tired enough.

This reflective moment is pivotal. In “choking” the story taking shape in Nick's head, Hemingway effectively suppresses the impulse for fiction. Nick's own short story is everything that “Big Two-Hearted River” is not. Hemingway's tale is essentially an anti-story; it depends upon a powerful resistance to fiction and its usual configurations. At the end of the story, Nick is permitted another flicker of literary consciousness. He contemplates heading into the swamp, where, he imagines, “fishing was a tragic adventure”; yet he stifles this impulse, as he did his story, and instead

returns to camp. In restraining the narrative movements of fiction (a resistance wonderfully mirrored in the way the trout hold steady against the current), Hemingway simultaneously releases the countervailing movements of the familiar essay—its emphasis on exposition, its lack of suspense, its attention to ordinary processes, its curtailment of climax. In other words, Hemingway allows the story's essayistic, or nonimaginative, features to assume literary precedence. In so doing, he turns the genres inside out. Hemingway's compositional triumph in "Big Two-Hearted River" is precisely in the way he transforms the conventions of nonimaginative literature into a memorable work of the imagination.

Hemingway complicates matters by blurring the conventions of genre even further. Nick's flickering short story is told in a style of free association, a style that essayists since Montaigne have made a central feature of their genre. As Donald P. Spence argues in *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth*, a book on psychoanalytic interpretation that nevertheless bears very strongly on my topic, free association is inherently at odds with narration. Patients in psychotherapy will often try to shape their stories—and alter memories—so that these will possess a satisfying degree of narrative coherence. Associative thinking has little to do with such coherence and what Spence calls "narrative fit." In looking for historical truth—what really happened—the analyst needs to be skeptical about narratives that appear a bit too literary, too "finished." Nick's miniature story in itself dramatizes a similar conflict: though he proceeds by quirky associations, Nick ultimately attempts to find some aesthetic closure or narrative fit—"a good ending to the story."

Essayism often emerges in literary works as a resistance to the aesthetic satisfactions of narrative, a resistance which can also be viewed as an opposition to the imagination itself. We can find this type of oppositional essayism running through the work of major poets like Wordsworth and Frost. An opposition to both narrative and imaginative constructs was, it should be recalled, at the core of Montaigne's literary agenda. In one of his earliest essays, "Of the Power of the Imagination" (an essay that, like Hemingway's story, confronts the issues of narrative truth, imaginative power, and sexual impotence), Montaigne claims that his "art" is an "escape" from imagination. This escape, he implies, is assisted by one of his many self-professed incapacities: "there is nothing," he adds, "so contrary to my style as an extended narration."

A careful reading of Hemingway's story, especially in the context of Montaigne's "Of the Power of the Imagination," should persuade us that our usual division (and hierarchy) of literary genres has its limits. Many important works of literature are compositionally impure, an amalgamation of genres, of genres often at odds with each other. Hemingway claimed, for instance, in a letter to Gertrude Stein, that in "Big Two-Hearted River" he was "trying to do the country like Cezanne," a comment that surely registers the extent of his aesthetic ambitions. It furthermore, when we consider what Cezanne achieved in his remarkable landscapes, suggests Hemingway's own juxtaposition of different conceptual frameworks. A story like "Big Two-Hearted River" should also make us hesitant in accepting the idea that some genres are inherently imaginative while others are not. Literary imagination is not a property of genre but of execution. Hemingway's essayistic sketch in which (to use his words) "nothing happens" is finally more imaginative than Nick's aborted story, and for the very reason that—nothing happens.

A definition of literature that privileges only the traditional triad of "imaginative" writing leads—as Northrop Frye tried to show—to a narrowing of the critical imagination. The persistent undervaluation of the essay and the essayistic underpinnings of much imaginative literature has resulted in a sharply skewed canon, the neglect of many important works, and it has helped create a professional rift between literature and composition studies. Barthes writes of the essay as the generating principle behind the evolution of all genres, a kind of genre of genres. Is the essay literature? Perhaps the question to ask is: can literature exist without it?

WORKS CONSULTED

- Atwan, Robert. 1990. ". . . Observing a Spear of Summer Grass." *The Kenyon Review* (Spring).
- Baker, Carlos. Ed. 1981. *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters*. London: Granada.
- Bakhtin, M. M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Edited by Michael Holquist and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: The University of Texas Press.
- Fielding, Henry. 1749. *Tom Jones*. In *Essays and Characters*, edited by Robert Withington. New York: Macmillan (1933).

- Hardison, O. B. "Binding Proteus: An Essay on the Essay," in *Essays on the Essay*, edited by Alexander J. Butrym. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press (1989).
- Harrison, Thomas. 1992. *Essayism: Conrad, Musil, and Pirandello*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hemingway, Ernest. 1938. *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. New York: Scribner's.
- Iser, Wolfgang. 1980. *The Act of Reading*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Iser, Wolfgang. 1993. *The Fictive and the Imaginary*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kundera, Milan. 1986. *The Art of the Novel*. Translated by Linda Asher. New York: Grove Press.
- Melville, Herman. 1984. *Pierre*. From "Notes" ed. Harrison Hayford. New York: The Library of America.
- Melville, Herman. 1982. *Mardi*. New York: The Library of America.
- Montaigne. 1965. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Translated and edited by Donald M. Frame. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Musil, Robert. 1965. *The Man Without Qualities*. Vol. I. Translated by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser. New York: Capricorn Books. (A new translation by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike appeared after this essay was written.)
- Spence, Donald P. 1982. *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Wellek, Rene, and Austin Warren. 1956. *Theory of Literature*. 2d ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.