Andrew McNeillie claims “Virginia Woolf was arguably the last of the great English essayists” (E1: ix). She produced an essay canon of around 650 essays, compiled two Common Reader collections, wrote two extended essays, A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas, and promoted the form through her work at the Hogarth Press, which published the Hogarth Essays, the Hogarth Letters, and the Hogarth Sixpenny Pamphlets. In a late essay, she comments that “It must often strike the reader that very little criticism worthy of being called so has been written in English of prose” (“De Quincey’s Autobiography” E5: 452). But she herself had been working most of her career, knowingly or unknowingly, to fill this perceived gap, frequently writing about fiction, but also about nonfiction: letters, diaries, biography, autobiography, memoir. And the essay. From “The Decay of Essay-writing” in 1905 to “Reviewing” in 1939, Woolf spent a lot of time essaying: exploring the genre, experimenting with it, and suggesting possible definitions for it.

As essayists and students of the essay make abundantly and sometimes gleefully clear, the genre inherently resists definition, seems formless or fragmented, and has a hybrid quality. Which may be why Woolf was so attracted to it. Woolf admired De Quincey, for example, who stood “obstinately across the boundary lines” (“Impassioned Prose” E4: 362) of poetry and prose in his essays. She herself, according to Melba Cuddy-Keane, achieves a hybrid form, one that links the “style and approach of the familiar essay and forms of everyday writing” to the content of the “academic professional article” emerging at that time (907). But even though the genre resists definition, Woolf also, like many other essayists before and since, persisted in trying to define it. Humorously, such as when she wrote to Vita Sackville-West in the summer of 1926: “…and I’m reading de Quincey, and Richardson, and again de Quincey…Vita, if you happen to know do wire what’s the essential difference between prose and poetry—It cracks my poor brain to consider” (L3: 281). And seriously, such as in the close to sixty essays on essayists or essays I’ve counted, where she reveals her own thinking about the essay and the role of an essayist, identifies traits of famous and not-so-famous essayists, and calls attention to the practices she most admires and deprecates. Reading these essays one right after the other cracked my poor brain, too, because as is often the case, Woolf paradoxically defines and resists defining, resists defining and defines. Here, my provisional and partial essaying through Woolf’s essays on the essay, some less well known, only begins to explore her many ideas about and practices in the genre. So, to essay forth!

Woolf blurs the lines between review, essay, and criticism (as I do). In her essay “Lockhart’s Criticism” (E5: 24–47), she suggests essayists write reviews about contemporaries and criticism about the dead. But in her essay about Priestley, she expects him to go beyond “the office of an appreciator, which is to stimulate our interest, particularly in our contemporaries” and attempt “the business of a critic, which is to make us reconsider our opinions” (“Appreciations” E3: 442). In “An Essay in Criticism,” she traces the process of writing a review of a contemporary, Hemingway, but calls it criticism and herself a critic.
When she compares William Hazlitt to other essayists, she calls his work not “independent and self-sufficient” essays, “but fragments broken off from some larger book” (“William Hazlitt” E5: 499). She then distinguishes his criticism, in which “either as lecturer or reviewer, [he] strode through the greater part of English literature and delivered his opinion of the majority of famous books” from those selfsame fragments which she now calls his essays (E5: 501)! In those, Hazlitt “loves to grope among the curious depths of human psychology and to track down the reason of things” (E5: 500). Then is criticism about literature and are essays about more general or personal topics? So why are J. C. Squire’s gathered newspaper columns about literature called a book of essays, not criticism (“Bad Writers” E2: 327) and Arthur Symons’s gathered essays are in a book written by a “[true] critic” (“Mr Symons’s Essays” E2: 69)?

Woolf often suggests what she does in “Mr. Symons’s Essays,” that we owe our “best criticism” to poets, writers: “it seems impossible for anyone who is not actually dealing with the problems of art to know the nature of them” (E2: 67). But being an artist does not guarantee one can be a critic, so that Joseph Conrad speaks as a novelist, not a critic, when he sees “more into the plan within the writer’s mind and less, perhaps, into the details of achievement” (“A Prince of Prose” E3: 290). Arnold Bennett, too, is a “writer in his workroom,” so can write the book of an artist, but not “a book of first-rate criticism” (“Books and Persons” E2: 129). Plus, she assumes that since Coventry Patmore’s main work was writing poetry, “it is more than likely that his essays will be mere interjections and exclamations uttered spasmodically in the intervals of his proper pursuits” (“Patmore’s Criticism” E3: 308).

Woolf sees various aims in the essayists she reviews. Symons’s essays “show us something we had missed before” (E2: 67). Patmore helps us “define our own vaguer conceptions” (E3: 309). Montaigne aims to communicate his soul (“Montaigne” E4: 76), Goldsmith wants us to “pool our discoveries and learn from each other” (“Oliver Goldsmith” E6: 21), Hazlitt aims “[to] communicate his own fervor” (E5: 501), Gosse aims “[to] illumine [literature], to make [it] visible and desirable (“Edmund Gosse” E5: 253), and Mr. Paget aims to make young people “in some way better” (“Old and Young” E2: 63). She herself suggests the critic should aim “not merely to deal out skilfully measured doses of praise and blame to individuals, but to keep the atmosphere in a right state for the production of works of art” (E2: 129).

One clear pattern emerges. Woolf does not like being lectured. Although she appreciates Canon Alfred Ainger’s reverence for literature, she thinks he “gives undue prominence to moral excellence in literature” and that his “literary judgment is swayed by what he knows of a man’s life” (“A Nineteenth-Century Critic” E1: 85). She calls Alice Meynell “a true critic, courageous, authoritative, and individual,” but wonders, “Is it right that a critic should make [her] audience so conscious of their stupidity?”, and thinks a critic “who brands certain words or phrases with the mark of [her] displeasure interferes with the liberty of the writer” (“Hearts of Controversy” E2: 176–77). She admires Stephen Paget’s combination of “simplicity, sympathy and absolute sincerity,” but regrets that sermons like his for young people cut the younger generation “off from communication with the old” (E2: 64, 61). She says Margot Asquith’s “penetrating and individual voice” is “irresistible,” but calls the prime minister’s wife a governess because her province “is not to reason, but to know; not to persuade, but to dictate” (“Governess of Downing Street” E4: 449–55).
She praises the glow in each sentence that comes from Mary Christie’s joy and ardor in life,” but claims she “was always something of a partisan with a zealot’s bigotry,” so her articles have “the high pitch of a scolding voice” (“Mary Christie” E6: 312–13). Woolf does not think scolding, moralizing, or laying down the law belong in the essay. But she also criticizes J. E. Spingarn for claiming “we have done with all moral judgment of literature” and argues that morality still has a place in the judgment of aesthetics (“Creative Criticism” E2: 123).

Woolf also does not like the sentimentality and platitudes of J. C. Squire (“Imitative Essays” E2: 249), the emphasis on virility in W. E. Henley (she calls him a brilliant schoolboy!) (“Henley’s Criticism” E3: 287), or the inducement to “young men to lay down their lives on [the British Empire’s] behalf” in Rudyard Kipling (“Mr Kipling’s Notebook” E3: 240). She does not like collections of essays that are joined together only by the binding (“Patmore’s Criticism” E3: 308) or that consist of introductions to editions—an essay in such a book prepares you to meet Henry Fielding in his novels, but the next essay instead introduces you to Tobias Smollett (“Henley’s Criticism” E3: 284). She protests against the essays in Robert Ross’s Masques and Phrases that rely on insider knowledge, thus putting the larger public “outside” (“‘Masques and Phases’” E6: 371).

So what does she admire, other than, of course, all of Montaigne, particularly his twists and turns and meanderings? She likes Patmore’s ability to turn the reader toward the books themselves (E3: 310), Hazlitt’s “initiatory and inspiring rather than conclusive and complete” criticism that “starts the reader on a journey and fires him with a phrase to shoot off on adventures of his own” (E5: 502), and W. H. Hudson’s suppression of his wide reading and learning in his “light and authoritative” treatment of forgotten writers (“In a Library” E2: 52). She appreciates the breadth of view some essayists provide, notes that De Quincey “widened the choice for others” (“Impassioned Prose” E4: 363), and praises the passages in Edward Thomas’ A Literary Pilgrim in England that “make his book like the talk of a very good talker” (“Flumina Amem Silvasque” E2: 162). She enjoys reading critical essays by practicing artists, as mentioned earlier, and she often picks up on a struggle between two opposing or contradictory forces in the essayists she writes about. Such essays reveal what Melba Cuddy-Keane calls Woolf’s “subversive and revisionary effect. Instead of adopting a stable point of view, the essays enact a continual questioning of opinion, in a manner which Woolf once referred to as her ‘turn & turn about method’” (906; see D2: 247). In “Oliver Goldsmith” (E6: 19–28), Woolf writes ten paragraphs of various lengths: one of those paragraphs begins with “But.” One begins with “Perhaps.” And the last four paragraphs all begin with “Yet,” a word also scattered within those paragraphs. Woolf’s “yet” generally differs from the “and yet” she identifies in her essay about Edmund Gosse, though (“Edmund Gosse” E5: 248–57). He “was able to insinuate” such “demure but devastating qualifications…after those two small words” (E5: 250). She suggests, consciously using an “and yet” of her own, that his qualifications grew out of caution and understandable fear (E5: 250–51). Gosse’s “and yet” attacks the writer; Woolf’s “and yet” attempts to understand the writer and complicates her focus on his passive-aggressive trait.

In a variation on the “yet” tactic, Woolf sometimes spends a great deal of time setting up a claim only to take it back or question it. In doing so, she shares something about her thinking and writing process with the reader. She does this in “A Book of Essays” about
Robert Lynd’s newspaper essays (E2: 212–14) and in her review of Within the Rim, Henry James’s essays about the Great War that included an essay written to benefit the Arts Fund (E2: 22–25). Woolf starts with her “tepid and formal” approach to James’s book: “books with a charitable object even by the most distinguished of writers bear…such traces of perfunctory composition, such evidence of genius forcibly harnessed to the wagon of philanthropy and sullen and stubborn beneath the lash, that one is inclined for the sake of the writer to leave them unread” (E3: 22). But, she writes characteristically, “we should not have said this unless we intended immediately and completely to unsay it. The process of reading these essays was a process of recantation” (E3: 22). Too, in “How It Strikes a Contemporary,” she goes on and on about how dire things are for contemporary writing and criticism, and then says, “But it is just when opinions universally prevail and we have added lip service to their authority that we become sometimes most keenly conscious that we do not believe a word that we are saying” (E3: 356).

The early “The Decay of Essay-writing” and the mid-career “The Modern Essay,” though, show Virginia Woolf most overtly attempting to define the genre. As an apprentice, in an editorially truncated version of what she actually wrote, Virginia Stephen critiques a certain kind of personal essay, but by the time she writes “The Modern Essay,” a review of a 5-volume collection of essays written between 1870 and 1920, Virginia Woolf articulates two very broad principles that underlie the practice of her own essays.

In her 1905 “The Decay of Essay-writing” (E1: 24–27), Stephen attempts to explain a current cultural phenomenon, the explosion of personal essay writing. Her editor saw this phenomenon as decay, thus the title he put on her work, but even within an essay he cut by half, she presents a more nuanced view (L1: 181). For her, the cultural significance lies in the “undoubted facility with which we write essays as though this were beyond all others our natural way of speaking” (E1: 25). She ties the increased use of the genre to the increased education of writers who feel obligated to impart what they know to readers hungry to learn (E1: 24–25). The quantity of print and the number of essays are not ultimately the problem, however: “so far, we can only applaud our use of pen and ink” (E1: 25). Since her definition of the essay as “essentially egoistical” and beginning “with a capital ’I’” (E1: 25) differs very little from what George Orwell and Joan Didion would say years later, and since she sees that trait as being “at least as old as Montaigne” (E1: 25), she does not deplore the personal in essays, either. She sees the issue as the mechanical and insincere employment of the personal, turning “individual likes and dislikes,” the “amiable garrulity of the tea-table,” into pronouncements about “the great mysteries of art and literature” (E1: 26). Her problem with the contemporary personal essay as practiced by some essayists is that it is, paradoxically, not personal enough: it does not do the difficult, honest, and courageous work of confronting the self. Instead, it is fake and timid, pretending an “oracular and infallible” nature (E1: 27) about topics it knows or cares nothing about. That kind of personal essay’s egoism lies in its easy evasion of the self, not in its being an expression of self. She critiques one result of the personal essay’s significance and popularity, not all results.

In the much longer review, “The Modern Essay,” published in the TLS on 30 November 1922 and then revised somewhat for the 1925 Common Reader (E4: 216–27), Woolf comments on almost one-fourth of the 72 essayists included in Ernest Rhys’s five-volume Modern English Essays, 1870–1920. Rather than critique Rhys’s choices (only four women are included), Woolf uses the review as an excuse to wander through essays by predecessors
and contemporaries, comment on various essayists, and arrive inductively at some tentative conclusions about a genre that capaciousness encompasses all classes of practitioners and all kinds of subjects. Working within an essay canon constructed by Ernest Rhys, Woolf comments on seventeen essayists representing a variety of essay types. Believing Max Beerbohm deserves credit for bringing personality back into the essay after a long period dominated by Victorian sages, Woolf gives his achievement the most space and time: “it must have surprised readers accustomed to exhortation, information, and denunciation to find themselves familiarly addressed by a voice which seemed to belong to a man no larger than themselves” (E4: 220). Some essayists merit not much more than a mention, but most receive some discussion of the essay included in the anthology. Mainly, though, Woolf uses her choices from within those of Rhys to tentatively sketch out two broad principles underlying the essay genre. Noting that the essay’s first principle is to “simply […] give pleasure” and that readers approach an essay “simply to receive pleasure” (E4: 216), Woolf begins and ends her essay by praising the essay’s ability to “draw its curtain across the world” (E4: 216) and “round us,” shutting readers in, not out (E4: 224). Using language perhaps more often associated with fiction than with nonfiction, she says an essay should “lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last”; this trance, she explains “is not sleep but rather an intensification of life” (E4: 216). Such a spell has more chance of being cast if the essayist avoids using long words (E4: 216), does not “[clutch] aimlessly at vague ideas” or scold readers (E4: 217). It also depends upon the essayist being able to use his or her “most proper but most dangerous and delicate tool” (E4: 220), his or her own personality: “[n]ever to be yourself and yet always -- that is the problem” (E4: 221). Second, the essayist must be able to write well. Woolf does not rigidly define this trait, but provides an example of writing that’s “bad because it is loose, plausible, and commonplace” and writing that’s “good because it is exact, truthful, and imaginative” near the end of the essay (E4: 224). She also makes it clear that writing well does not mean slavishly imitating fine writers of the past: “to write like oneself and call it not writing is a much harder exercise in style than to write like Addison and call it writing well” (E4: 219). Finally, included in the art of writing well is backbone, “some fierce attachment to an idea” (E4: 224), and an anchor in the specific and individual, not in the general and corporate (E4: 223).

In this essay, Woolf models how to arrive at a definition (while admitting all definitions are vague) and works to create a reader who, by becoming someone who can potentially define his/her own terms, breaks down the barrier between writer and reader. Because her approach in the essay allows a definition of the genre to depend upon and grow out of the practice of many essayists, rather than the other way around, the essay implies that the definition is open to revision. Woolf writes an essay that reflects the common reader’s practice: she runs up a “rickety and ramshackle fabric” that gives only “temporary satisfaction” because the reader will continue to snatch at other essays that may change the nature of the fabric (“The Common Reader” E4: 19). Woolf’s method in this essay indicates how a canon might remain flexible, elastic, open, alive, dependent on essayists themselves. Her two principles are quite broad and could apply to all literature, so do not restrict or exclude; indeed, they implicitly allow room for many essayists and essays beyond the ones chosen by Rhys. Clearly, she does not want a definition that means only a few can qualify. She highlights the provisional nature of any definition
by including paradoxes, acknowledging contradictions, and stating qualifications, and she uses a conditional language and an uncertain tone. For example, “certain principles appear to control the chaos, and we detect in the short period under review something like the progress of history” (E4: 216), “[o]ne hesitates even to say” (E4: 223), “The comparison makes us suspect” (E4: 224), she writes, and all definitions are “vague” (E4: 224). She asks questions, she starts many sentences with “But” or “Yet,” and she changes the TLS declarative phrase, “destroys the symmetry,” to “has a way of spoiling the symmetry” for The Common Reader, a much less forceful way of putting it (E4: 223, 225).

Given Woolf’s essaying, can anything be said about the essay, her essay? Virginia Woolf essays toward a certain kind of personal essay, toward a more open or ambiguous definition for the genre that has only two very flexible principles, toward an inductive method, toward a tone that draws readers in, toward an awareness of how audience changes a writer’s work, toward a practice of measuring contemporaries against the best work of the past, toward a way of shaping material that always leaves room for change or revision, toward a definition of good writing as giving pleasure and yet being rooted in an idea, toward a common reader. She essays (sashays?) toward an essay that fuses the backbone of a “fierce attachment to an idea” with the voice of someone we can “sit down with […] and talk” (E4: 224, 221), toward an essay that creates a space for a personal response that can change as one continues to read.

Writing nonfiction did something for Woolf that writing fiction could not do, give her a way to share her education with others. She wants readers to gain knowledge about books, about literature, about reading, about writing, but without our feeling alienated or lectured or scolded. The curtain she wants a good essay to draw round us is one “that shuts us in, not out” (E4: 224). Woolf essays toward essays that move us from being outsiders to insiders, including us all in the conversation about the pleasure of literature’s spell.

At the end of “Mr. Symons’s Essays,” Woolf writes that to place limits upon genre is to “force a living being between the walls of a rigid mould” (E2: 70). During a lifetime of essaying, she worked to define the essay in a way that did not confine it. Trying to derive some guidelines from her beloved Montaigne, Woolf writes “One quality or principle there is perhaps—that one must not lay down rules” (E4: 74). And yet (hal!), I really must, playfully, note her “perhaps”!

Notes

1. See, for example, Carl Klaus, Douglas Hunt, G. Douglas Atkins, Alexander J. Butrym, Joseph Epstein, Philip Lopate, and Lydia Fakundiny. As Carl Klaus notes in his introduction to Essayists on the Essay, Theodor Adorno defines the essay as “inherently skeptical and antimethodical” (xx), and his work, following Montaigne, “highlights the ultimate yearning of essayists to be free from any systematized form of thinking or writing” (xxi).

2. See the appendix to this essay. I should caution the reader that my count is tentative; determining whether or not an essay’s content includes enough commentary on the essay to be considered an essay about the essay was sometimes tricky. In addition, I have included in this number original essays and extensively revised versions of them.

3. Leila Brosnan cautions us against separating our readings of Woolf’s essays from their “material circumstances of production.” As she reminds us, “most of Woolf’s essays were, in fact, first produced as literary journalism in the commercial public sphere” (41). Brosnan aims to consider Woolf’s non-fiction as both journalism and essay so that both “historical context and textual practice” and both Anglo-American and European feminism can inform the discussion (9–11).
4. It is impossible to know what her essay originally said since in her letter to Violet Dickinson, she also claimed the Academy "altered words on their own account, without giving me a chance to protest" (L1: 181).

5. George Orwell and Joan Didion both agree. In their respective essays titled "Why I Write," Orwell says that writers write for four reasons, one of which is "sheer egoism" (6), and Didion says she stole the title from Orwell, notes that all three words in the title share the sound "I," and then comments, "In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people" (17).

6. In 1905, Stephen criticizes the use of tea-table topics in the essay, whereas in her 1939-40 autobiographical "Sketch of the Past," Woolf would wonder if her tea-table manner had marred the tone of her Times Literary Supplement essays (150).

7. Anne Fernald makes a similar distinction in "A Room of One's Own, Personal Criticism, and the Essay." "The odd result of Tompkin's and Gallop's experiments," Fernald writes, "is a self-centered criticism that is also impersonal" (167).

8. To Rhys's oblique history, i.e., his list of great English essayists before 1870—"Montaigne, Bacon, Fuller, Addison, Steele, Lamb, Hazlitt, Carlyle, Arnold, Morley" (ix)—Woolf adds Browne, Swift, Macaulay and Froude.

9. In "Mr Howells on Form," she writes, "There may be truth as well as indolence in the remark that the less we seek to define art the more chance there is that we shall be able to produce it" (E2: 324).

10. Randi Saloman's Virginia Woolf's Essayism for a full examination of this idea within the context of genre boundaries.

11. Gualtieri, however, says Woolf's image "evokes an airless atmosphere" (xi). See Fernald (175-76) and Klaus ("On Virginia Woolf on the Essay" 33-34) for readings that support my more democratic interpretation.

Works Cited


Appendix: Essays by Virginia Woolf about Essays and Essayists

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Decay of Essay Writing, E1: 24–27
A Nineteenth-Century Critic, E1: 83–86
The English Mail Coach, E1: 365–68
Portraits of Places, E1: 124–27
The Sentimental Traveller, E1: 157–59
Blackstick Papers, E1: 228–29
Art and Life, E1: 277–80


In a Library, E2: 52–54
Old and Young, E2: 61–64
Mr Symons’s Essays, E2: 67–71
Melodious Meditations, E2: 80–82
Creative Criticism, E2: 122–25
Flumina Amem Silvasque, E2: 161–65
Hearts of Controversy, E2: 176–78
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Within the Rim, E3: 22–25
Mr Gosse and His Friends, E3: 105–08
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English Prose, E3: 171–76
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Masques and Phases, E6: 369–72

Ruskin, E6: 460–64