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RMIT University

Rebecca Harkins-Cross

An unmethodical method: Contextualising the critical essay

Abstract:

This paper charts a theoretical and literary genealogy for what I term the *critical essay*, which I define as a literary essay that includes analysis of an artwork amongst its objects of inquiry. After briefly outlining the increasing prevalence of the critical essay in contemporary letters, I review theoretical schemas surrounding the critical essay, and grapple with the terminological slippage of labels like “essay” and “criticism”. Drawing from Marxist and feminist schools of literary studies, I argue that alternative forms of critical writing have generally been propounded not as literary modes but rather as scholarly revolts against disciplinary strictures. I argue that such alternative forms of critical writing share a desire to invent modes of analysis and expression capable of challenging dominant class, race and/or gendered ideologies. I go on to propose that the critical essay may be capable of disrupting the epistemological frameworks undergirding public criticism, making space for writers who, due to their subject positions, have not historically been conferred critical authority.

Biographical note:

Dr Rebecca Harkins-Cross is lecturer in creative writing at RMIT University. Her research investigates the intersection of critical and creative practice, with further research interests in creative nonfiction, life writing, ekphrasis and hybrid literary forms. Her essays and cultural criticism have been published widely in journals and periodicals across Australia and the world. Her debut book, *The Headless Woman*, is forthcoming with Fireflies Press.

Keywords:

Literary essay, creative nonfiction, public criticism, autotheory, fictocriticism

Introduction

The critical essay is currently experiencing a resurgence in Western letters, evinced in contemporary publishing trends and tertiary creative writing programs. That this literary mode is predominantly being utilised by writers who have not historically been bestowed critical status – namely, women writers, queer writers and writers of colour – suggests that this resurgence is not only a reflection of a changing media landscape, but also a direct challenge to the value systems underpinning traditional designations of critical legitimacy. By foregrounding their subjectivity, the critical essayist demonstrates how their lived experiences invariably influence how they view, interpret and pass judgement upon an artwork; revealing themselves as a thinking and feeling subject in turn reveals the illusion of critical objectivity, calling into question who and what this illusion has been designed to serve. I will argue that the critical essay therefore holds the potential to authorise critical voices which have not traditionally been considered valuable, reputable and trustworthy.

Occupying the interstice between public sphere criticism and the literary essay, two modes of writing traditionally under-researched in the academy, the critical essay hasn't been an object of sustained scholarly inquiry. This paper therefore begins by constructing a methodological framework for the critical essay, which necessitates wrestling with the slippery labels of “essay” and “criticism”. To avoid the quagmire of further muddying these genres' parameters, this paper proposes the critical essay as a topical subset of the literary essay – that is, an essay in which the writer meditates upon artworks – rather than a genre unto itself. The literary essay's stylistic proclivity towards personal, conversational, fragmentary, experimental and digressive prose is, in significant ways, at odds with that of criticism, if one views criticism as formal, analytical, methodical, rhetorical and rational. This paper accordingly asks, how do we interpret criticism that acts like an essay, or an essay that acts like criticism? Can we trust the critic's opinions if they behave like an essayist, who since progenitor Michel de Montaigne has oft claimed to be a dilettante? What happens if the critic renounces traditional responsibilities like close reading or cultural contextualisation to wander along thought's circuitous paths? And if the critic is not acting as an arbiter of artistic worth, what role might they then play?

After charting the literary essay's origins in the work of Montaigne, who is widely considered “the ur-essayist” (Lazar & Madden, 2015, p. 3), I define the essay's determinable characteristics, and question the methodological efficacy of further splintering a somewhat nebulous genre. To conceptualise the essay as a mode of critical inquiry, I will analyse Theodor Adorno's “The Essay as Form” in depth, expanding upon Adorno's scholarly aims to propound the critical essay as a literary undertaking. I will then examine the place of public criticism within the academy, which like the literary essay has struggled to acquire due regard, and tended to privilege masculine epistemologies and discourses. I look to various feminist interventions into scholarly writing such as *écriture féminine*, autobiographical criticism, autotheory and fictocriticism – all modes of critical inquiry which seek to unite subjectivity/objectivity, thinking/feeling and personal experience/theory – asking how they might be instructive antecedents for the contemporary critical essay. In doing so, my argument moves beyond defining what the critical essay is, to identifying what the critical essay is

capable of doing, and for whom. I conclude that the critical essay creates space for critical voices who, due to their subject positions, have not traditionally been granted critical authority.

Setting the scene: The contemporary critical essay

Contemporary criticism is an increasingly hybrid genre, which is demonstrated in the North American National Book Critics Circle (NBCC) Awards recent shortlists. In 2014 Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* became the first book in the prize's history to be nominated across two categories, criticism and poetry. Announcing *Citizen* as the poetry winner, committee chair Rigoberto Gonzalez said *Citizen* could "easily be read as prose poems or as micro essays"; by merging traditionally discrete forms of literary endeavour, Rankine had produced an exploration of current race relations that was "at once critical and enormously compassionate" (NBCC, 2015). *Citizen* was ultimately claimed for the poets, but this dual nomination is emblematic of contemporary criticism's increasingly hybrid tendencies – or, at least, book-length criticism published in the USA. Indeed, the NBCC's recent shortlists are peppered with such genre-bending texts. In 2015, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* – which merges life writing and theory to investigate embodiment, motherhood and queerness – won for criticism. The same year British author Helen McDonald's *H is For Hawk* – which interleaves literary biography and close reading of T. H. White into a memoir of grief and falconry – was nominated for autobiography, while Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* – a personal study of racism constructed in epistolary form, addressed to Coates's son – was nominated for criticism. Eula Biss's *On Immunity: An Inoculation*, a 2014 criticism finalist, was also a work of autobiography, as was 2013 finalist, Hilton Als's *White Girls*. While recent trends in the NBCC Awards alone cannot encapsulate the broader publishing landscape, even in North America, the fact that in this instance it is critics who are endorsing hybrid critical writing is not grounds for dismissal as, say, self-aggrandisement. The task of recognising artistic innovation often falls on peers, or indeed, on critics themselves.

A significant factor in contemporary criticism's increasingly hybrid tendencies is the decline of the broadsheet newspaper (historically the locus of public sphere reviewing), which demands certain stylistic precepts from contributing critics. Newspapers often ask critics to: efface the "I", under pretences of journalistic objectivity; avoid jargon or theory which could alienate a general readership; and pass judgement, with reviews acting as a kind of consumer guide. Arts sections have continued to dwindle since what Rupert Murdoch termed the "rivers of gold" (Murdoch in Simons, 2012) – that is, revenue generated by classified advertisements – evaporated in the internet age. As newspaper book supplements have shrunk, online publications like *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The New Inquiry* and *The Millions* have emerged, alongside local incarnations including the *Sydney Review of Books*, *Liminal Review of Books* and the (recently defunct) *TLB Review of Books*, where critics are not beholden to print journalism's strictures. The status of professional critics has been challenged by the newspaper's declining dominance, some of whom cast blame on an internet culture which accords unearned influence to common readers and critical layman, allowing "amateur book bloggers [to] proliferate" (Goldsworthy, 2013). In a more generous reading, the lack of print/distribution overheads allows online publications to cater to niche audiences, publish

more diverse writers and offer contributors expanded word counts (although this rarely correlates with increased remuneration), encouraging essayistic looseness in critical writing.

The historical homogeneity of critical voices within traditional media may also play a contributing role. In 2010, the inaugural VIDA Count survey of gender in North American book reviewing provided ample data confirming a biased field, where 70% of critics granted space across the 12 major publications examined were men (VIDA, 2011). In 2015, VIDA expanded their metrics to assess female critics' race, gender and sexual identity, and ability, where the data was even more skewed (VIDA, 2016). Australia's equivalent, the Stella Count, first surveyed gender breakdowns of critics in 2013, which gives the impression of a more equitable critical landscape: 60% of critics were female (Helfenbaum & Sullivan, 2013). But this does not suggest that Australian criticism represents some egalitarian ideal. For example, when *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* were granted funding from the Copyright Agency/Judith Neilson Institute in 2020 to foster emerging critics, two of the four initial (all white) appointees resigned citing lack of diversity among recipients (Books+Publishing, 2020). The ongoing search for alternative ways to approach criticism seems inextricable from this sociopolitical reality.

The hybridisation of contemporary criticism can also be linked to the increasing popularity of creative nonfiction within tertiary creative writing programs. Within creative writing, the literary essay is often situated beneath this umbrella term – which Margot Singer and Nicole Walker define as “a hybrid that perpetually troubles and transcends generic boundaries” (2013, p. 4) – whose popularity has fostered greater awareness of the literary essay's history and possibilities, aided by recent anthologies tracing the essay's origins (for example, D'Agata, 2003, 2009, 2015, 2016). Julienne Van Loon further argues that the resurgence of the literary essay can be linked to post-9/11 consciousness, arguing the genre's “embodied subjectivity” has been utilised to navigate “the pressure and imperative many writers in the west seem to be feeling to contemplate and narrate a highly personalised and political life/world” (2017). Either way, renewed interest in the literary essay has arguably cultivated further formal experimentation from practitioners, including merging traditionally discrete forms of nonfiction writing. Institutional validation hasn't directly filtered from creative writing into literary studies, however, where the essay remains less studied than “the *archi-genres* (theatre, poetry, *recit*)” (Forsdick & Stafford, 2005, p. 7). According to practitioner E. B. White, “the essayist ... must be content in his self-imposed role of second-class citizen” (2006, p. ix). As I will shortly argue, situating the literary essay within the amorphous catch-all of creative nonfiction has potentially exacerbated rather than clarified definitional ambiguities.

Problems of definition: The essay

The critical essay's lineage can be traced back to the literary essay's earliest practitioners. Since Montaigne's *Essais* were first published in 1580, the literary essay has often encompassed critical evaluations of artists and their work. Montaigne declared his essays a self-portrait in words, in which he “portrayed [him]self whole, and wholly naked” (2004, p. 3), but the author's self-knowledge is acquired – or, at the very least, refined – through dialectical engagement with

other thinkers. Throughout Montaigne's substantial oeuvre his prose converses with writers and philosophers including Seneca the Younger, Cicero, Virgil, Erasmus, Horace, Plutarch and Lucretius, while several of his essays perform more overt critical functions. For example, "In Defence of Seneca and Plutarch" is a rejoinder to historian Jean Bodin (p. 186), and "On Some Lines of Virgil" examines poetry's unique capacity to render depictions of love, though in accordance with the essay's peripatetic spirit Montaigne also wanders into meditations on marriage, sex and fidelity (p. 260).

While scholarship's recurrent return to Montaigne suggests an ongoing anxiety about the literary essay's "second-class" status, contemporary definitions still stem from Montaigne's formative contribution to the genre. Before Montaigne, the term *essay* – taken from the Middle French verb *essai*, meaning to "trial" or "attempt" (Harper, 2001b) – was, according to Montaigne translator M. A. Screech, "used of schoolboys' 'attempts' or 'exercises'; it was used when apprentices tried out their skills, well before producing their masterpiece" (2004, p. xii). The notion of the essay as an experiment derives from Montaigne's example, presenting a pilot of ideas rather than a conclusive or definitive argument, and often considered a transcription of the thinking mind in motion.

The literary essay's continual transgression of generic boundaries, observable in characteristics like hybridity, fragmentation and capaciousness, has often ensnared the form's academic study in repetitive debates. These have included searching for literary paternity to grant the form legitimacy, evident in essay anthologists' masculine quests to proclaim who conquered first: John D'Agata's *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (2009) posits its genesis in ancient Sumerian list-making, while Phillip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay* (1994) begins centuries later with Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca's letters. Proposing storied lineages is arguably an attempt to counter the ongoing question of whether the essay can be considered art at all – a debate which philosopher and literary critic György Lukács declared exhausted in the early 20th century (2010, p. 16).

Montaigne's insistence that "it is myself I paint" (2004, p. 3) has resulted in privileging the personal essay as one of the genre's primary manifestations. This can be seen in Lopate's aforementioned anthology, and is exemplified in White's collected essays, where he self-deprecatingly describes the mode as "the last resort of the egoist, a much too self-conscious and self-serving form" (2006, p. x). Indeed, the flipside of such quests for self-knowledge are enduring critiques of the personal essay as solipsistic, narcissistic, under-researched and overwritten. In one of the few historicising essay anthologies collated by a woman, *The Best American Essays of the Century*, editor Joyce Carol Oates explicitly states her desire to move away from "that staple of traditional essay collections, the unhurried musings of a disembodied (Caucasian, male, privileged) consciousness"; Oates makes an exception for White's "Once More to the Lake", however, which she describes as "its highest, most lyric expression" (Oates & Atwan, 2000, p. xx).

The essay's capacity to merge other modes of writing presents particular problems for those attempting to define it. The genre is arguably split between two paterfamiliaes and two predominant modes, which Joel Haefner identifies as Montaignian and Baconian:

the Montaignian essay was personal, familiar, solipsistic, associational, reflective, anecdotal, unorganized, spontaneous, and meditative; the Baconian essay was objective, impersonal, concerned with great social and moral issues, rational, authoritative, methodical, balanced, and argumentative (1989, p. 260).

Carl Klaus argues that utilitarian notions of the essay as “systematically organized, factually detailed, closely reasoned and plainly written” dominate, privileging the essay's rhetorical modes over the historical, meditative, poetic or dialogic (1991, p. 3). If we flick through local anthologies like *The Best Australian Essays*, compiled annually from 1998–2017, the essay is clearly a broad church; under its banner Montaignian meditations are far less likely to appear than longform journalism or personal opinion pieces [1]. The increasing prominence of creative nonfiction within publishing and the university has increased New Journalism's stature in these realms. What began as “glorious chaos” (Wolfe & Johnson, 1973, p. 36) deployed by the likes of Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson and others [2] has become the foundation of prestige magazine journalism. New Journalism's pre-eminence has been reinforced by Lee Gutkind in the magazine *Creative Nonfiction* and various textbooks; Gutkind defines creative nonfiction through its deployment of fictional techniques in service of fact (1997).

The literary essay's resurgence in creative writing has not resolved persistent struggles to delineate generic parameters. Reflecting creative nonfiction's influence, debates have tended to focus on issues arising from journalism and literature's intersection, such as memory's fallibility, the essayist's responsibility to truth, and the ethics of writing real lives (see: Lazar, 2008; Prentiss & Wilkins, 2014; Talbot, 2012). While recent anthologies like *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction* (2013) have turned to form rather than moral principles, the genre's slipperiness abides; editors Singer and Walker argue that “genres ... are not fixed categories with clearcut boundaries, but constellations of rhetorical modes and formal structures grounded in varying degrees of fact” (2013, p. 4). Creative nonfiction's mutability frequently results in theoretically vague essays-on-the-essay, which have analogically conceptualised the genre as an “easy chair” (Monson, 2014, p. 9), “weedy garden” (Lisicky, 2008, p. 1) or winding “river” (Moore, 2014); the essay is often figured through spatial metaphors, variously described as “baggy” (Fernald, 1994, p. 170), “ambulatory” (Good, 1988, p. xii), or “itinerant” (Howarth, 1988, p. 634). Moreover, focussing too much on form can potentially depoliticise the genre and obscure its relationship to power (Boetcher Joeres & Mittman, 1993, p. 17). This inability to agree on what exactly the essay is, except for its tendency to transgress generic boundaries, results in a frustrating cyclicity when mapping it.

Scholars attempting to analyse the essay's subsets must therefore grapple with the genre's capaciousness. If the essay is indeed capable of merging other forms and styles, is it useful to study its subgenres? This is perhaps why the critical essay has been so continually overlooked in previous scholarship. There have been some contributions which seek to define the critical

essay, including Claire De Obaldia's *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (1995) and Graham Good's *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (1988), though these are tangents in larger works. Good notes the critical essay as a topical subset of the genre – alongside travel, moral and autobiographical essays (p. xii) – but prefers to group and analyse essays by author rather than content. De Obaldia, on the other hand, is concerned with larger philosophical questions about the nature of art in the work of Heidegger and Hegel, and how they apply to modernist essayists. The critical essay is also mentioned in co-editor/publisher Robert Atwan's foreword to *The Best American Essays of the Century* – alongside the personal, philosophical, humorous, pastoral, autobiographical, scientific, documentary and political (Oates & Atwan, 2000, p. xiii) – but he offers no further clarification as to its particular qualities. Perhaps it's more fruitful, then, to see the critical essay not as a subgenre with its own set of distinctive characteristics but, as Good does, as a topic of essay – that is, a literary essay that concerns itself with artworks/artists. The critical essay therefore negotiates a balance between the essay about art and the essay as art.

The critical essay and intellectual freedom

Now that I have defined the critical essay as a topical subset of the literary essay, rather than a genre unto itself, I shall turn to the question of what the critical essay allows the writer to say. Adorno's "The Essay as Form" is useful here, because it broadens the discussion beyond what the essay is to what the essay can do. Writing between 1954–1958, Adorno draws upon the essay as literary form to theorise it as a mode of critical inquiry. He identifies familiar characteristics like chance, play, ephemerality and hybridity, in a form which rejects closure/totality, tolerates doubt and often juggles several ideas simultaneously. Where North American traditions have privileged the personal essay, however, Adorno sees the essay primarily as a mode of critical inquiry. Good clarifies that

the relatively late development of the genre in Germany meant that ... it tended to be associated with art; thus Germanic theory usually equates the *critical* essay with the essay as such, defining it as that form of art which has art as its subject matter (1988, p. 16).

For Adorno, what the essay has been censured for, "decried as a hybrid" and "lacking a convincing tradition" (1984, p. 151), are in fact its strengths. The flipside of the essay's "intellectual freedom", however, is the risk of failure: "it must pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience by the lack of security" (p. 161) – an anathema to scientific modes of positivism and phenomenology, which Adorno is rallying against.

Without excising the specific philosophical and political dimensions of Adorno's arguments, his definition of the essay is constructive to ascertain what the critical essay as literary form might also achieve. Adorno champions the essay to refute dichotomies between science and art, challenging further epistemological associations with the rational/irrational, systematic/chaotic and logical/random. Such binary thinking says that where science tests hypotheses via airtight methodologies and evidence, art belongs to a creative realm of romantic inspiration: the domain of the unconscious rather than the conscious mind. By refusing the polarity of

“technician or dreamer” (p. 152), Adorno suggests there are other ways of approaching knowledge and discussing art. Its method is unmethodical, says Adorno, refusing disciplinary knowledge that constrains thought through rigid methodologies. Such notions also become important for the critical essayist as literary practitioner, if they seek to refuse the restrictive logics of both scholarly disciplines and rule-bound journalism.

Adorno’s challenge to objective/subjective divisions is also useful for understanding the critical essay as literary form. For Adorno, positivism is grounded in an imagined objectivity, which requires the scholar to eradicate traces of the thinking self under the pretence of universality or authenticity; as Good argues, “the essay aims ... to preserve something of the process of thinking, whereas systematic thought presents a fully finished and structured product” (1988, p. 20). Traditional thought favours knowledge that is considered summative, and provable through substantiated methodologies, inferring any trace of subjectivity is a mark of excess, dilettantism and/or a lack of rigour. The essay, in contrast, shows up objectivity as illusory, privileging “individual experience, unified in hope and disillusion” (Adorno, 1984, p. 156). But how does the essayist obtain the wisdom of what Adorno has called the “man of experience” (p. 157)? Here, one must question precisely whose individual experience is authorised. Feminist scholars Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman highlight that Montaigne’s experience, for example, was legitimated by his patrician education and former political career, which was unavailable to his female counterparts (1993, p. 13), thus undermining notions of the essayist as “everyman”.

In the scholarly essay, borders between form and content are rigidly policed in order to maintain this objective façade. Here, Adorno says the aesthetic must be spoken of unaesthetically, even though this uncoupling risks “losing touch with the aesthetic object” (p. 153). When the essayist dares to play with aesthetic themselves, they open themselves up to charges of parasitism, “acquir[ing] an aesthetic autonomy that is easily criticized as simply borrowed from art” (p. 153). Rather than creating something new, the essayist’s artistry is viewed as theft or mimicry. Adorno’s essay thus also appears to challenge notions of true art as individual and unique; the critical essay is, necessarily, a response to another’s work. But in Adorno’s appraisal, the essay can never truly be art, as it is reliant on another artwork as its *raison d’être*: “The essay, always directed towards artefacts, does not present itself as a creation” (p. 165). For Adorno, the essay’s openness represents a kind of intellectual freedom that carries with it utopian possibilities, emancipating the intellect from received systems/meanings and capable of disrupting the status quo (p. 162). The essay is therefore “the critical form *par excellence*” (p. 166), but can never be art in and of itself. When Adorno sets out to overturn dichotomies between art and science, his insistence on demarcating creation from essaying risks reinforcing the very hierarchies he proposes the essay might dismantle.

Adorno may be advocating for a more fluid mode of critical discourse, but he is not proposing a proto-postmodern levelling of cultural value. He makes distinctions between the “good” and “bad” essay, scorning essayists who describe an artist’s psychology, chat about people, or turn cultural artefacts into commodities; the bad essayist “chews up good art-works into bad ones” (p. 154). Adorno still situates art in a rarefied realm, and unconsciously reveals the ways in

which his distinctions are gendered: the notion that the bad essay “chats about people” (p. 154) suggests it belongs to the feminine realms of gossip or anecdote – a censure which seems paradoxical when conversational language is one of the literary essay’s hallmarks. The bad essay’s excesses also carry connotations of feminine abjection; as Susan Griffin writes, “whatever lies within the confines of the feminine province is defined *sui generis* as either trivial or obscene ... and as such not fit for public discourse” (1993, p. 1).

Adorno’s definitions of the essay largely derive from Lukács, but the central point on which they differ is the question of whether the essay can be considered art. According to Lukács, if science’s domain is “facts” and art’s is “souls and destinies” (2010, p. 18), he situates the essay firmly on the side of art. He likens the essay to the portrait, a painting which represents an existing likeness. That the essay mediates its subjects through literature or art doesn’t, for Lukács, lessen the effect of its meditations. For Lukács, the poet and the essayist draw inspiration from the same wellspring, with a slightly different emphasis: “poetry takes its motifs from life (and art); the essay has its models in art (and life)” (p. 26). While the critical essay may cast judgements, “the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict ... but the process of judging” (p. 34). The questions that arise during the judging process are not obscured but rather made visible as a key feature of the essay itself.

In either estimation, the essay’s tendency to privilege subjective, digressive or ephemeral thought has compounded critiques of the genre as trivial or mundane. Yet the essayist’s active embrace of dilettantism, often deliberately positioning themselves as “an amateur ... who has merely done a little reading up” (Gass, 1985, p. 25), can also be read as a rejection of institutional knowledge as authoritative. This stance reveals the essay’s potentiality to articulate alternative subject positions – that emotional, bodily, intimate or domestic experience, all associated with feminine interiority, may also be subjects of critical inquiry and literature – yet it is important to acknowledge that for centuries the essay, like most forms of literary and scholarly endeavour, remained within the purview of white men; women and writers of colour were largely excluded from both essaying and critique until the 20th century [3]. The essay’s circuitous path to knowledge may challenge traditional thought’s epistemologies, yet Adorno’s theorisation of the form simultaneously creates further intellectual stratification. His promise of intellectual freedom, however, remains appealing for those seeking alternative ways of approaching critical inquiry.

Problems of definition: criticism

The literary essay’s meandering logic might seem, on the surface, antithetical to critical inquiry. In literary criticism, which has been the archetype for that of other artforms, the shift from what Terry Eagleton describes as “the genteel amateurism of an older generation of upper-class literary scholars” to the “new, rigorously analytical approach” of modern Cambridge intellectuals such as T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, William Empson, F. R. Leavis and Raymond Williams involved submitting prose and poetry “to tenaciously detailed scrutiny and passing judgement on their quality” (2022, p. 3) – a mode of close reading that Eagleton claims was “a profoundly moral activity which cut to the heart of civilisation” (p. 4). While Eagleton’s

“critical revolutionaries” sought to situate literature within its social context, and sometimes questioned universalising canons, their methodical approaches have had an enduring influence on cultural perceptions of the critic’s role: as an expert who weighs an artwork’s merits and flaws on judgement’s scales. Is it coincidence that the critics who have historically been granted the power to make such assessments are the same subjects conferred authority within a broader patriarchal culture? Eagleton’s revolutionaries are all white, straight-passing men.

According to Andrew Ford, such masculine biases have been inherent in formal literary criticism since its inception, which he argues was ushered in by “public, civic, and male discourses” (2002, p. 7). Charting early criticism in Greek antiquity, Ford posits criticism’s origins not in the literary philosophy of Plato or Aristotle, but in a speech delivered by Telemachus in Homer’s *Odyssey*. During a palace dinner party, Odysseus and Penelope’s son orates upon the entertainment. For Ford, criticism emerges as a “public act of blame or praise” (p. 3), itself a mode of performance embedded within the primarily oral culture which it then critiqued. Telemachus’ public utterance is a crucial moment in his coming-of-age, “a way of claiming a social role and asserting authority (*kratos*) over others” (p. 6), and this authority is obtained by asserting his patriarchal dominance. His speech begins by dismissing Penelope’s thoughts on the matter, declaring that “this is an affair for men” (Homer in Ford, p. 7). Even a noblewoman like Penelope should keep her aesthetic responses to herself. When songs and poems were later written down, classical criticism would begin theorising poetic form, but Ford suggests that in the intervening centuries classical criticism retained the spirit of Telemachus’ oration.

The role of the critic, much like the artworks they address, has evolved significantly since this specific term emerged in the 14th century. The etymology of *critic* comes from the Middle French *critique*, “one who passes judgment”; from Latin *criticus*, “a judge, a censor, an estimator”; and from Greek *kritikos*, “able to make judgments” and *krinein*, “to separate, decide” (Harper, 2001a). The contemporary meaning as “one who judges merits of books, plays, etc” derives from the 17th century, which in English has carried connotations of “censurer” or “faultfinder” (Harper, 2001a). The legalistic and biblical intimations of “judgement” cast the critic as a man apart, pronouncing verdicts from on high, suggesting artistic merit might be judged by criteria as sacrosanct as gospel or law. Such associations derive from the Enlightenment period, when the figure of the public critic fully emerges. In an era when religious authorities warned secular literature distracted from devotion, James Van Horn Melton suggests that early Western critics emphasised how non-religious texts could simultaneously entertain and provide moral instruction (2001, p. 97). While the notion of the critic as an assessor of aesthetic value is evident in antiquity, the Romantic period additionally championed “the creative imagination” and “the powers of poetic language” (Klancher, 2005, p. 146), where aesthetic value derives from artistic originality. Ideas of originality and creative genius would become foundational in secular canon-building, which Harold Bloom says correlated with the mid-18th century “literary period of Sensibility, Sentimentality, and the Sublime” (1994, p. 20). The critic as canon-builder has the expertise to ordain whether an artwork will “stand the test of time” or has the makings of a “classic” – a judgement which can only be made with the assurance that artistic value is objective and universal.

The relationship between criticism and canon-building was compounded when literary criticism entered the university. Dominick LaCapra notes that “the very constitution of literary criticism as a discipline depended upon a network of inclusions and exclusions” (1985, p. 111); Bloom also links canon-building to constructing syllabi (1994, p. 15). In the wake of what philosopher Paul Ricœur calls “the school of suspicion” (1970, p. 32) – his term for Marx, Nietzsche and Freud’s depth-based hermeneutics – the critic takes on the further role of interpreter, as excavator of hidden meaning. As Rita Felski suggests, Ricœur’s hermeneutics still dominates scholarly critique in the 21st century (2015, p. 1), embraced by the disciplines who would challenge the canon’s inviolability. Indeed, Bloom writes *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* in what he decries is the canon’s twilight, overtaken by what he calls “the School of Resentment”: “Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, or Deconstructors” (1994, p. 20). There are few critics writing today, either within the academy or the public sphere, who would dare stake their claims upon a timeless canon.

Since the professionalisation of literary studies within academia, lines have often been drawn between scholarly and public critics. Public criticism – used here to refer to critical writing appearing within non-academic publications, such as newspapers, magazines and literary journals – is traditionally an under-researched area of arts disciplines like literary studies, cultural studies and cinema studies. As Melinda Harvey and Julieanne Lamond note in regard to book reviewing, public criticism has largely been considered beyond the remit of academic study, despite literary studies relying on book reviews as historical sources (2016, p. 85), and has often been a “convenient foil” for a discipline which must still justify itself within the academy (p. 86).

One of the few monographs on public criticism, Gail Pool’s *Faint Praise: The Plight of Book Reviewing in America* (2007), draws further distinctions between the reviewer and the critic. For Pool, the distinction primarily lies in where their work is published and the publication’s function: the reviewer, producing responses for public sphere media, writes about new cultural texts and does not engage theory; the critic writes about texts retrospectively, often for a specialised audience familiar with the critic’s theoretical lexicon (p. 10). Such divisions have tended to cast the reviewer as an amateur generalist, pitted against the academic expert who brings analytic and interpretative rigour to critique. The weathered workhorse depicted in George Orwell’s 1946 essay “Confessions of a Book Reviewer” springs to mind, hunched over his desk trying to draw connections on books ranging from *Palestine at the Cross Roads* to *Scientific Dairy Farming*, with not enough time to read the texts in question let alone obtain the background knowledge to adequately assess them. Orwell casts reviewing as a “thankless, irritating and exhausting job” (2009, p. 235), in which the professional reviewer must manufacture an opinion more exciting than their truthful reaction: “This book does not interest me in any way, and I would not write about it unless I were paid to” (p. 236). No matter the nomenclature, the public reviewer or public critic is seen as an expert and a hack simultaneously.

Like the “second-class” essayist, cultural perceptions of public critics as writers *manqué* also endure. “If you ask around,” says *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott, “you will learn that a critic is, above all, a failed artist, unloading long-simmering, envious resentments on those who had the luck, talent, or discipline to succeed” (2016, p. 13). Pool too notes that “reviewers have been compared to vermin, dogs, woodpeckers ... and most often – and perhaps worst of all – failed writers” (p. 35). These ideas are dramatised in Oscar Wilde’s 1891 essay “The Critic as Artist: With Some Remarks Upon the Importance of Doing Nothing”, which demonstrates they are embedded in the larger question of whether criticism, much like the essay, can be considered art. Presented as a dialogue between two speakers, Ernest and Gilbert, the former suggests that the artist works best in a critical vacuum: “Why should the artist be troubled by the shill clamour of criticism? Why should those who cannot create take upon themselves to estimate the value of creative work?” (1997, p. 35). Gilbert contests his friend’s nostalgia for an imagined artistic salad days before the critic’s interference, reminding him of the interrelationship between art and criticism since antiquity (p. 40). Gilbert would also surely contest Adorno’s conclusion that the essay cannot be considered art, for Gilbert argues that the critic, like the artist, refashions their materials into a new form: “I would call criticism a creation within a creation” (p. 48). Like Lukács, Gilbert refuses to separate creativity and criticism as divergent tasks, or assign them differing levels of prestige. The critic, like the essayist, is also a kind of portrait artist: they treat “the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation” (p. 49) – a riposte to notions of the critic as leech, feeding off the lifeblood of the great artiste.

Apart from Pool and Eagleton’s examples, another recent scholarly contribution to the slim field on public sphere criticism is James Ley’s *The Critic in the Modern World: Public Criticism from Samuel Johnson to James Wood* (2014). Deploying aspects of biographical criticism and close reading, Ley presents a study of six “public critics” who form an unbroken genealogy from the 18th century until today, each encapsulating their own “distinct historical and cultural moment” (p. 7). Passing the critical baton across four centuries, the figures Ley ordains public critics – namely, Samuel Johnson, William Hazlitt, Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, Lionel Trilling and James Wood – are, like Eagleton’s revolutionaries, all white and male.

It is worth examining Ley’s study in further detail, as it reveals the foundational biases inherent in the very notion of public discourse. *The Critic in the Modern World* opens with Eliot’s much-quoted aphorism that “Criticism is as inevitable as breathing”. Ley’s introductory gambit continues in this vein: “Find something meaningful or moving, engaging or irrelevant, beautiful or ugly, and one is beginning to act as a critic” (p. 1). Suggestions that criticism is inevitable are recurrent, echoed in the following interview with Elizabeth Hardwick:

Criticism, analysis, reflection is a natural response to the existence in the world of works of art ... Without it, works of art would appear in a vacuum ... It would be a dismal, unthinkable world with these shooting stars arousing no comment, leaving no trace. (1985)

Metaphorical allusions to bodily functions or astral phenomena connote that criticism is, as Hardwick states, “a natural response”. If criticism is an innately human tendency, it is surprising then that the critic, at least in Ley’s estimation, has remained so remarkably homogeneous. Unlike Eliot, Hardwick does not make the grade. From Telemachus on, public discourse has been coded as masculine, relegating the feminine to the privacy of domesticity. Hélène Cixous highlights this gendered divide when she writes, “how great a transgression it is for woman to speak – even just open her mouth – in public” (1976, p. 80).

Reach and influence within each writers’ respective milieu are how Ley selects his public critics, yet the material and ideological structures that have conferred such authority are beyond the study’s remit. The problematic omission of any women or people of colour – to Hardwick, we might add Virginia Woolf, Susan Sontag, W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, et al. – is neither acknowledged nor addressed. His study originates from a Bloomian framework, suggesting that critics, much like poets, are subject to an “anxiety of influence” – that each successor must reassess the techniques/approach of his forebears and, in a Freudian mode, kill their fathers (Bloom, 1997). Apart from the literal gendering of regarding literary influence as a relationship between fathers and sons, the Oedipal urge to kill off one’s fatherly precursors in order to become a fully-realised subject is, as feminist literary scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue, not available to the female writer who was never a subject (in the Freudian conception) to begin with (1984). Doubly so for the raced or queered writer then, twice othered (and often pathologised) within Freudian paradigms. Gilbert and Gubar expand Woolf’s attempts to kill “the Angel in the house” – a spectre of Victorian femininity Woolf names after Coventry Patmore’s eponymous poem, who, when Woolf puts pen to paper, insists that women should remain “sympathetic”, “charming”, “unselfish”, unopinionated, self-sacrificing and “above all ... pure” (1942, p. 150) – to suggest the female writer must also do away with this figure as enshrined in literature: “before we women can write ... women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been ‘killed’ into art” (1984, p. 17).

Woolf’s famed call for the woman writer to obtain “a room of one’s own” is illuminating when discussing Ley’s conception of the public critic, for this is a space that tests divisions between public and private. A room within the private space of the family home isn’t necessarily one of solitude: unable to own property, this is a room owned by husband or father. A truly private room, in which the woman writer has autonomy, provides potential access to the public sphere through writing. This room, as scholars such as Tegan Zimmerman have noted, is therefore not only physical but also psychical (2012). Restrictions upon the woman writer’s life become restrictions upon her writing and the scope of her imagination. Mental freedom is granted by pecuniary freedom. When it is no longer necessary to “flatter any man”, the woman writer is granted the ability to think for herself: “That building, for example, do I like it or not? Is that picture beautiful or not? Is that in my opinion a good book or a bad?” (Woolf, 2005, p. 169). With such freedoms, she is beginning to think like a critic.

Feminist interventions: *Écrituré féminine*, autobiographical criticism, autotheory, fictocriticism

If both the literary essay and public criticism have historically been grounded in masculine discourses, are the critical essay's liberating possibilities open to those writers whose subject positions have been associated with the feminised body rather than the masculine mind? While Adorno doesn't connect the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity with the Cartesian dualism of mind/body, feminist scholars including Cixous, Jane Tompkins and Jane Gallop have shown how divisions between thinking and feeling are also gendered. Griffin further links these polarities to the shift from Montaignian and Baconian essaying: "as the essay moved further away from meditation and reflection, further from what we call 'confessions' and closer to science, with its claim of objectivity, it began to resemble more and more this celestially detached brain" (1993, p. 3), echoing the "disembodied (Caucasian, male, privileged) consciousness" described by Oates (Oates & Atwan, 2000, p. xx).

Cixous' calls for a new feminist writing which foregrounds the female authorial "I" as speaking subject can be read as an attempt to break out of these suffocating binds. In the manifesto-like "The Laugh of the Medusa", Cixous suggests that women have internalised the Freudian conception of adult female sexuality as "dark continent" (1950, p. 212), other and unknowable. For Cixous, Medusa is not the fallen woman whose castrating power is literalised in her phallic snake halo, but rather a beautiful goddess made monstrous by the male imaginary. Putting aside the racial connotations of Freud's metaphor, Cixous claims that woman may only overcome the mythical lack ascribed to her by writing herself – that is, to write oneself into being. To write oneself is to bring the female body into writing, which woman has been violently expelled from "by the same law, with the same fatal goal" (1976, p. 875). Cixous' insistence that "woman must put herself into the text" (p. 875) can thus be read as a call to autobiography, encouraging women writers to speak their experiences and renounce the shame which has previously silenced them.

Such calls have been heeded by schools of autobiographical criticism, variously referred to as "personal criticism, narrative criticism, autocritography ... personalist or experimental writing ... the personal essay, writings 'on location', or simply the essay" (Freedman, 1996, p. 3). Tompkins's ground-breaking 1987 paper "Me and My Shadow" acknowledges a fundamental rift in her writing self. She explains, "there are two voices inside me ... One is the voice of the critic who wants to correct a mistake in the essay's view of epistemology. The other is the voice of a person who wants to write about her feelings" (p. 169). According to Tompkins, Western thought's desire to jettison emotion from knowledge is another of theory's "patriarchal gestures":

Because women in our culture are not simply encouraged but required to be the bearers of emotion, which men are culturally conditioned to repress, an epistemology which excludes emotions from the process of attaining knowledge radically undercuts women's epistemic authority. (p. 170)

The style of Tompkins's essay attempts to bridge this rift, introducing emotion and anecdote into scholarly discourse. Gallop further connects this duality to the psyche/soma divide of Cartesian subjectivity, challenging "the split between public and private which keeps our lives

out of our knowledge” (1988, p. 4). “If we think the mind-body split *through the body*” writes Gallop, “it becomes an image of shocking violence” (p. 1). The ramifications of this split are explored further in *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism* (Freedman et al., 1993), which similarly foregrounds autobiographical criticism as a feminine mode.

Like the personal essay, autobiographical criticism has also been charged with narcissism. Tompkins’s and Gallop’s critical experiments have been questioned by, for example, Anne Fernald, who argues they result in “a self-centred criticism that is also impersonal” (1994, p. 167). Fernald turns to Woolf’s essays for a hybrid writing that is polyvocal, performative, and garners personal responses from readers across generations, yet is non-revealing of the intensely private Woolf herself: “this simple difference between a personal criticism chiefly about the critic and one that uses the critic as a model of the attentive ... reader helps us begin to separate successful personal criticism from mere self-indulgence” (p. 168). Fernald’s accusations, which assume that divulging personal experience is symptomatic of self-absorption, overlook the performativity of such gestures. When Tompkins “reveals” herself, she is “a person sitting here in stocking feet, a little bit chilly because the windows are open, and thinking about going to the bathroom” (p. 173). Revealing the scene of writing reveals nothing much about the writer in question at all. When men like Montaigne write about their lives, it is considered universal – in Lopate’s words, “when he was telling about himself, he was talking, to some degree, about all of us” (1994, p. xxiii). When women do, it is viewed as myopic, domestic and/or frivolous.

Lauren Fournier situates autobiographical criticism under the broader mantle of “autotheory”, making the astute observation that writers and artists working in autotheoretical modes often create new nomenclature for their practice to “emphasiz[e] their desire to differentiate what they are doing from preexisting genres” (2019, p. 46). Fournier says autotheory has gained new traction in the early 21st century, describing “works of literature, writing, and criticism that integrate autobiography with theory and philosophy in ways that are direct and self-aware” (2021, p. 7). Autotheory is conceived as a self-reflexive mode of theorisation, used as a way of understanding lived experience and the body, which has been embraced by feminist, queer and raced writers and artists who “live on the edges of art and academia” (p. 7). While Fournier argues the “autotheoretical turn” informs feminist art practices beyond literature, she acknowledges that autotheory has retained a particularly close alliance with the essay, in which “the writer can move adeptly between different registers, topics, methods, and modes of argument, including the anecdotal” (p. 38).

In the Australian academy, autobiographical criticism has generally been designated as “fictocriticism”. This umbrella term describes a brief flourishing of hybrid writing in the Australian academy in the 1990s and 2000s, which Anna Gibbs argues originated in women’s studies before being adopted in creative writing as a nexus between academic discourse and creative practice (Gibbs, 1997; Brewster, 1996; Smith, 2005) [4]. Apart from the portmanteau’s literal connotations, fictocriticism is generally thought to be a more literary form of criticism, which is able to incorporate (and celebrate) “all manner of literary detritus” (Gibbs, 1997) and which engenders not only new modes of writing but also of thinking. Introducing the key

anthology *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism* (1998), Amanda Nettelbeck suggests fictocriticism unites the creative and critical “in the sense of mutating both, of bringing a spotlight to bear upon the known forms in order to make them ‘say’ something else” (p. 4). It is also conceived as a form of writing capable of traversing genres, topics and subject positions, often within the one piece of writing, incorporating what Gibbs calls “indeterminate forms” such as prose poem, lists, fables and clichés (1997). In these estimations, fictocriticism sounds much like the literary essay.

Conclusion: Why the critical essay today?

The aforementioned antecedents all make cases for another criticism, and are instructive in understanding the critical essay today. At the risk of flattening these interventions’ nuances, they appear to stem from similar frustrations: that traditional modes of criticism are incapable of capturing what the writer wants to say, constricting rather than enlivening thinking, reflection and analysis. They are all modes which, at different times, foreground the critic as a thinking and, importantly, a feeling and experiencing subject, so often excised from both academic and popular critical discourse. It seems no coincidence, then, that the critics who seek out alternative modes of critical inquiry tend to also foreground bodies that, historically, have not been considered authoritative within traditional critical frameworks. The subjective experience of the gendered critic, the openly-queer critic or the racialised critic invariably influences the way they view art and, indeed, the world.

Despite these interventions’ importance, the literary essay remains a malleable and porous genre, which has always provided a space for the digressions, anecdotes and asides that “traditional thought” would excise. It is a form that 19th century practitioner Ralph Waldo Emerson compared with the “panharmonicon”, a musical instrument that imitated the sounds of other instruments and sound effects. Growing frustrated with writing sermons, which Emerson described in his journal as “cold mechanical preparations for a delivery most decorous” (Emerson in D’Agata, 2003, p. 251), the essay proffered Emerson a space where “everything is admissible – philosophy, ethics, divinity, criticism, poetry, humor, fun, mimicry, anecdotes, jokes, ventriloquism – all the breadth and versatility of the most liberal conversation, highest and lowest personal topics” (Emerson in D’Agata, 2003, p. 252). Emerson’s transcendental image of the essayist as “transparent eyeball” – “I am nothing; I see all” (1979, p. 11) – might epitomise Oates’s “disembodied consciousness”, but his rapturous description also hints at the political possibilities of a form that has transgressed boundaries between public/private, objective/subjective, masculine/feminine and nonfiction/fiction since its inception.

The contemporary critical essay, as a topical subset of the literary essay, is indebted to the aforementioned philosophical, theoretical and literary antecedents who broke important ground in their attempts to liberate their writing and thinking from rigid genre conventions, epistemological systems and institutional hierarchies, and fought to foreground the subjectivity inherent in any act of critical inquiry. To challenge traditional criticism’s value systems is not transgression for transgression’s sake, but rather “an attempt to lean in a certain direction. It is

a tropism toward the light and heat of another knowledge” (Griffin, 1993, p. 9). Self-disclosure allows the critic not only to unveil the power structures they and their work are embedded within, but to self-reflexively interrogate the questions, doubts, biases, experiences and emotions that animate their own knowledge and understanding. To reveal the critic as thinking and feeling subject is not to evade rigour, but rather to complicate its metrics, and to question what and who the illusion of critical objectivity is designed to serve. Whether or not the critical essay can fulfil its promise of intellectual freedom, it proffers an expansive, generative and exciting sense of possibility.

Notes

[1] James Ley notes this was a particular issue in this series, whose publisher Schwartz Media tended to privilege writing from its own journalistic periodicals (2018).

[2] Wolfe conceives New Journalism as primarily a male genre, with Joan Didion and Barbara L. Goldsmith the only women included in the 1973 anthology.

[3] The literary essay’s tendency to favour white male perspectives is explored in feminist anthology *The Politics of the Essay* (Boetcher Joeres & Mittman, 1993) and Cristina Kirklighter’s *Traversing the Democratic Borders of the Essay* (2002), which looks beyond the Western canon to Latin American practitioners.

[4] The term *ficto-criticism* was first employed in Australia by Stephen Muecke and Noel King in 1991 to comprehend contemporaneous tendencies in postmodern thought. For a thorough overview of the movement’s contested origins, see: Flavell, 2009.

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