The essay occupies an odd place in the history of literature. One moment, the essay is a marginal form, barely alive on the fringes of poetry and fiction, the next, the trendiest thing in town. Recently, its fortunes have been on the rise. Wherever you look, the essay turns up: in graphic memoirs, in blogs, on the radio, in poetry. Its proponents range from Ira Glass and David Sedaris to Andrew Sullivan and Julie Powell, not to mention filmmakers such as Agnes Varda and Harun Farocki. No other genre is as infinitely adaptable as the essay.

In its directness and intimacy, the essay is the ideal literary form for the twenty-first century. Overwhelmed by an endless flux of information, we inwardly crave the momentary stay against confusion promised by the essay. We relish, as Scott Russell Sanders wrote, “the spectacle of a single consciousness” confronting the chaos of cultural overload to which we awake each day. 1 The trademark of the essay is its intimacy, the human voice addressing an imagined audience. We also relish the opportunity to lose ourselves in the wandering thoughts of the writer. In his Dictionary of the English Language (1755), Samuel Johnson defined the essay as “a loose sully of the mind; an irregular indigested piece.” What Johnson saw as disorder we see as an experiment in form and sensibility. We eagerly embrace the essay’s nonlinear quality, losing ourselves in its unpredictable twists and turns and moody swings. Yet getting lost in an essay is not the same as getting lost in a novel. Novels have plots; the essay is famous for rambling, its paratactic structure favoring breaks and digressions over continuity—the kind of disjointedness criticized by Johnson. What Johnson didn’t like appeals to us now. It is the mindful-ness of the essayist, no matter how digressive, that offers us a refuge from the hullabaloo of the world, the discursive slippage from one thought to another.

Most readers know that the word “essay” comes from the French essai. The verb form, essayer, means to attempt, to experiment, to try out. The standard definition of the genre holds that an essay is essentially a way of trying on a thought or an idea like a hat. The fitting room in a French clothing store, by the way, is called a salon d’essayage. On an artier note, the Club d’Essai was the name of an experimental sound studio directed by the inventor of musique concrète, Pierre Schaeffer, in Paris after the war.

In a way, all thought is experimental and remains so until it can be fixed in a sentence. We are all essayists for a brief moment. As O.B. Hardison, Jr. has noted, Roland Barthes suggests that the essay may have even preceded the concept of genre, owing to its ability to emulate the genesis of thinking. 2 If there is something that is fundamental about the essay to the play of the human mind, as Montaigne insisted also, one wonders why it took so long for the form to evolve. Why wasn’t there a Bronze Age essay, for instance, something written by the hero in retirement (surely Nestor would have had something to say after the burning of Troy) or perhaps set down by the stay-at-home wife, the caretaker of the oikos, a meditation on crushing olives or weaving while waiting the warrior’s return? Given the wanderings of Odysseus, his irresistible digressiveness and curiosity, not to mention his fondness for the personal anecdote, the Odyssey might have been that Ur-essay. It could at least have contained essay-like intervals—“On Cyclopes” or “Of Listening”—enlivened by shrewd reflections on the credulity of men and the cleverness of fish.

All the confusion concerning the essay’s literary status could have been avoided long ago had Homer composed “On Lying,” or better yet “On Dying.” A few centuries later, Aristotle would have wrapped his mind around the form in his theory of literature and that would have been that. Let us imagine such a moment: Aristotle on the essay, the final chapter of the Poetics. All literature, according to Aristotle, is mimetic, if only because humans are instinctively imitative, the one difference between us and other animals. Tragedy is an imitation of noble action, he said, and aspires to a certain magnitude. Likewise with the epic, only there the scale is much larger. Comedy and satire, on the other hand, mimic the deeds of low-life types.

It’s not difficult to imagine the place of the essay in this scheme. Like tragedy or satire, the essay is certainly an imitation, although not of action but of thought. The essay is an imitation of thinking, or more precisely, it is “thought thinking.” But the kind of thought that occurs in the essay isn’t an abstract conceptual exercise; instead, as an imitation of thinking, the essay requires an actor who can perform that role. As readers, we relish the spectacle of the firstperson narrator laboring over the minutiae of existence, struggling to divest himself, as Theodor W. Adorno put it, of the traditional idea of truth. 3

The work is a tragedy, Aristotle said, only if it arouses pity and fear, and that’s usually the result of some unthinkable deed, such as murdering a husband or fathering a sister. What does the essay, as an imitation of thought, arouse? Amusement, perhaps, but rarely terror. The essay is not a catastrophic but a convivial genre, one that aspires toward a direct relationship with the implied reader. If catharsis is the end of tragedy, the essay’s payoff is recognition, which is different from knowledge or mere understanding in that it arises from felt or shared experience. To recognize something is to be affected by what we already know but didn’t realize, an insight that leads us back to what is both familiar and strange. In that
respect, the essay may sometimes include what Freud called the “uncanny.” 4 The uncanny, as Nicholas Royle explains, is a “crisis of the proper,” involving a “peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar.” 5 How else should we regard E.B. White’s oftanthologized essay, “Once More to the Lake,” and the recognition in its surprise ending? 6 That essay may look like a hokey tribute to a boy’s pastoral childhood (“Summertime, oh, summertime, pattern of life indelible,” 535), but White’s lake turns out to be haunted by his narrator’s doppelgänger, who springs on him unawares like a phantom in a gothic tale. At first White’s persona, cast in the classic role of the unreliable narrator, doesn’t recognize the resemblance between himself and his double, but when he does it’s too late. In the uncanny spectral face of his other self he sees an image of his own death. The delivery of this punch line depends on the cunning way in which White sets up his own narrator, how he is taken in by his own eloquence. The narrator’s surprise may lie not only in glimpsing mortality but in realizing that he has been had by the writer. What commands the reader’s attention in the end isn’t the honesty or sincerity or lyricism expressed by White’s narrator—but rather his false consciousness. 7

As “Once More to the Lake” suggests, essays are more dramatic than we might suspect. If this surprises us, that’s partly a side effect of the essay’s uncertain literary status. The drama inherent in the form depends on how the writer’s stand-in (the persona or narrator) grogges a way toward knowing. That grogging is always interesting because it’s usually so self-conscious and doubtful. Recall Joan Didion’s getting lost in Haight-Ashbury, how she confesses to the reader that, petite and diffident, she is not up to the task at hand, making sense of the 1960s. Bronze-age warriors, it should be said, were not ordinarily tormented by doubt. Even the most suspicious of heroes, Odysseus, rarely questioned his own actions. By definition the Homeric hero cannot afford to hesitate—the battlefield requires certitude and the sudden thrust of swords—and that is perhaps why, after all, the Odyssey is not an essay. Self-assured types, as Phillip Lopate reminds us, do not make good essayists. 8 What we expect from the modern essay-writer is a tendency to doubt and hesitate. This is partly the legacy of Montaigne.

The “father” of the essay, as he is often called (actually, as he calls himself), was a well-to-do aristocrat who retired from his legal and administrative duties near Bordeaux in 1571 at the age of thirty-eight and devoted the remainder of his days to reading and writing. Montaigne’s essays were quirky, ironic, provocative, and stylistically engaging. As Montaigne once explained, he saw his writing primarily as a reflection of the human mind caught in the act of thinking, as if the essay, unlike other prose forms, were capable of turning the mind inside out.

His use of the first-person je was a radical and deliberate choice that parted ways with other forms of early modern prose dominated by theological and philosophical writing. Against the tradition of scholasticism, Montaigne’s style looked transgressive. There was something hideous about it, he thought, as though it were an amalgam of ill-fitting parts. Yet the mock apologies he repeatedly offers to readers for speaking in his own idiosyncratic voice, allowing his thoughts to ramble on the page, suggest that any guilt Montaigne might have felt for deviating from the norm was imaginary at best, a running joke shared by the writer and his readers at the expense of the more sober discourses.

Montaigne’s experiments with subjectivity were inspired by the realization that the subject is a wobbly and unsteady thing. “I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself,” he wrote in “Of Cripples.” “We become habituated to anything strange by use and time; but the more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself.” 9

So inconstant was this self that it seemed to suffer from “a natural drunkenness.” This is why, Montaigne explains, he sought a different style of writing. “If my mind could gain a firm footing,” he confessed in “Of Repentance,” “I would not make essays, I would make decisions; 11 but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial” (610–11). The self-deprecating humor on display here is not much different from that of Socrates, whose example Montaigne cites frequently. What Montaigne borrowed from the master of ignorance was a good eye for human inadequacy. With it he assumed a pose of eccentricity and marginality, a clever turn that justified his selfdramatization.

As a literary construct, Montaigne’s narrative je was immensely important in the history of prose because it opened up a space outside of mainstream writing for a non-institutional voice. Montaigne may have felt anxious about turning his gaze inward, nervous about the uncertainty he flirted with, but he was convinced that the knowledge gained about the errant nature of human thought not only would have philosophical worth, but would also raise questions about the kind of authoritarian practices tied to the endless religious quarrels of late-sixteenth-century France.

Montaigne’s writing was in fact unusually autobiographical for an age under the sway of doctrinal thought. Like his near-death experience from a riding accident recounted in “Of Practice,” some of his personal anecdotes were even memoir-like. “I went riding alone one day about a league from my house,” he writes, when a large work horse galloping much too fast “came down like a colossus,” sending both the rider and his horse head over heels. Montaigne describes his near-tragic fall as though he were both in the moment and removed at the same time: “There lay the horse bowled over and stunned, and ten or twelve paces beyond the dead, stretched on my back, my face all bruised and skinned, my sword, which I had had in my hand, more than ten paces away, my belt in pieces, having no more motion of feeling than a log” (268–69). Montaigne is less interested in suffering than in the strange state of his mind as he lies halfway between life and death. The awful commotion of the reckless rider coming up from behind, his horse caught in the act of thinking, as if the essay, unlike other prose forms, were capable of turning the mind inside out.

Montaigne’s project occupied much of his time during the last two decades of his life. He carefully revised the first two books of essays published in 1580 and began writing new ones. In 1588, a second edition of his essays appeared, and by the time of his death in 1592 the book had grown significantly. As he wrote in the preface to the first edition of his Essais, “I am myself the matter of my book. You would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject.” 2 That coy disclaimer fooled almost no one. By Renaissance standards, in fact, Montaigne had assumed a pose of eccentricity and marginality, a clever turn that justified his selfdramatization.

A French writer may have invented the essay under the influence of the ancients, but English writers succeeded in canonizing the genre in a variety of guises. Montaigne’s act, 12 though, was not an easy one to follow. Francis Bacon never even tried. His book of Essayses (1597), written in a tight-lipped, aphoristic style, offers few glimpses behind the curtain. 10 It’s not that Bacon refused to perform, but that his feat is more syntactical than
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"Solace of Open Spaces").

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noisy Knoxville ("A streetcar raising iron moan; stopping, belling and starting; stertorous, rousing and raising again 14 its iron increasing moan and

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Charles Lamb, who often criticized his avatar "Elia" as a "stammering buffoon," Hazlitt was determined to ground the essay's introspective spirit in

and felt about everything. He would let his mind roam freely, even if that meant falling under his own censure. Like his friend and fellow essayist

contrary and, at times, contentious impulses. Hazlitt took Montaigne's example seriously: like his model, he would tell the reader what he thought

opportunity to argue against the prevailing philosophy of utilitarianism, or any formality or system, and many of his essays give voice to these

Hazlitt's "On the Pleasure of Hating" bears out Adorno's idea that "the law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy."14 Hazlitt never missed an

conclusion, he recoups his combative spirit and, with a wink, ironically targets himself as a fit object of misanthropy, although in a way that

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All-consuming despair. It is as if the essayist, as actor, were no longer putting on a show but had become overwhelmed by the implications of his

The playful thought experiment that began the essay turns into a dark fantasy that leads the author into deep water, where he must resist his own

more than surrender "to the innate perversity and dastard spirit of his own nature which leaves no room for farther hope or disappointment" (197).

It wasn't long, however, before other English writers did follow Montaigne's more whimsical lead. While the periodical essayists of the eighteenth

century (Joseph Addison and Richard Steele) found Montaigne too digressive for their tastes, nineteenth-century writers such as Leigh Hunt, William

Hazlitt, and Charles Lamb were intrigued by his expression of subjectivity. The great merit of Montaigne, according to Hazlitt, was that he was the

first modern writer "to say as an author what he felt as a man" ("On the Periodical Essayists").12 That Montaigne could write whatever passed

through his mind seemed immensely important, and his commitment to self-portraiture ("C'est moy que je peins"—"it is myself that I paint") was taken

to heart by nineteenth-century writers, in whose work the performative nature of the essay reaches its peak.

Though instinctually quarrelsome, Hazlitt, we are told, was nervous and shy in social situations, but hardly so in his essays, where he invented an

"other self," to borrow a phrase from Lamb. What made Hazlitt so interesting as an essayist was this brazen persona. In one of his most

entertaining essays, "On the Pleasure of Hating," Hazlitt gives voice to the perverse idea that animosity lies at the root of existence, and he does so

with terrific vehemence.13 Like so much of Hazlitt's writing, this essay is a bravura performance. It begins as Hazlitt watches a spider crawling

across the floor of his study and wonders how frightened the insect must be by the author's vast size. Although it is in his power to crush the tiny

thing, he lets the spider escape. He feels (in principle) no ill-will toward it. Still, he despises spiders, loathes them "with a sort of mystic horror" (190).

This small episode introduces Hazlitt's startling idea that hatred is part of the natural order of things, and that without it "we should lose the very

spring of thought and action. . . . Hatred alone is immortal" (190). But in Hazlitt's dialectical view, hatred is also a disaster. Like a "poisonous mineral"

it distorts and corrupts the human mind, stripping all good things of their apparent value. "Love and friendship melt in their own fires. We hate old

friends: we hate old books: we hate old opinions; and at last we come to hate ourselves," Hazlitt writes in a crescendo of loathing (192). 13

Channeling his inner Hamlet, Hazlitt is swept up in a wave of pessimism that moves the essay toward the bleak conclusion that man can do no

more than surrender "to the innate perversity and dastard spirit of his own nature which leaves no room for farther hope or disappointment" (197).

The playful thought experiment that began the essay turns into a dark fantasy that leads the author into deep water, where he must resist his own

all-consuming despair. It is as if the essayist, as actor, were no longer putting on a show but had become overwhelmed by the implications of his

subject, by the reality of his thoughts. Hazlitt's inner struggle is not a life-changing crisis, however, and his recovery is quick. At the essay's

conclusion, he recoups his combative spirit and, with a wink, ironically targets himself as a fit object of misanthropy, although in a way that

preserves the integrity of his perservency. "Have I not reason to hate and to despise myself? Indeed I do; and chiefly for not having hated and

despeised the world enough" (198). Ornery though he might be, Hazlitt achieves his own kind of détente with the world.

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contrary and, at times, contentious impulses. Hazlitt took Montaigne's example seriously: like his model, he would tell the reader what he thought

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Charles Lamb, who often criticized his avatar "Elia" as a "stammering buffoon," Hazlitt was determined to ground the essay's introspective spirit in

the irony of selfcriticism. Thought was agonistic. For Hazlitt, as for Montaigne, the essay was a way of acting out this process.

Aristotle ranked what he called "the spectacle" and what we would describe as place or setting last on his list of importance when outlining the elements of tragedy in The Poetics, since it was the province of the set designer rather than the poet. The presence of scene was not at first greatly significant in the evolution of the essay, and it took time for the idea of place to gain relevance. Earlier essayists concentrated on exploring their own character, and the site of inquiry didn't always matter. In most cases, the writer's mind, driven to put itself on display, was the mise en scène of writing, the real spectacle. As Adorno has said, the essay was in fact embarrassed by an "excess of intention."15 The many avatars adopted by essayists document this surplus: the periodical personae of Addison and Steele ("Isaac Bickerstaff," "Nestor Ironsides;", "Mr. Spectator"), Charles Lamb's "Elia," Emerson's transparent eyeball, Oliver Goldsmith's "Lien Chi Altangi," and Bruce Frederick Cummings's "W.N.P. Barbellion" all demonstrate that personality trumped place for a long time in the history of the essay.

Except for Henry David Thoreau and the occasional open-air foray, the significance of place in the essay remained unexplored until the twentieth

century, when the essayist literally began rambling outdoors, as if the wandering instinct of the genre had finally decided to find real space to move

through. The canonical essayists of the last century linger in the reader's memory less for their displays of wit and personality than for having

engaged with unforgettable places: John Muir straddling an ice bridge in an Alaskan blizzard, coaxing a terrified dog across the abyss ("Stickeen");

the cobblestone streets of Virginia Woolf’s London, lined with flower shops and bookstores ("Street Haunting: A London Adventure"); James Agee's

noisy Knoxville ("A streetcar raising iron moan; stopping, belling and starting; stertorous, rousing and raising again 14 its iron increasing moan and

swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past, the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog

its tracks"—"Knoxville: Summer of 1915"); Loren Eiseley hunting bones in the sunbaked Badlands; James Baldwin's Harlem; E.B. White's faux-

pastoral Maine lake; Joan Didion's southern California ("As it happens, I am in Death Valley, in a room at the Enterprise Motel and Trailer Park, and it

is July, and it is hot"—"On Morality"; Tom Wolfe's magic bus; Annie Dillard's Tinker Creek; Gretel Ehrlich's Wyoming ("During the winter, while I was

riding to find a new calf, my jeans froze to the saddle, and in the silence that such cold creates I felt like the first person on earth, or the last”—"The

Solace of Open Spaces").

Introducing scenic elements into the essay allowed writers to contextualize their thought in ways that rivaled the novel. Consider the predicament
Annie Dillard says, there's nothing you can't do with the essay: "no subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed. You get to make up your care. Italian writers of the sixteenth century had a word for this: sprezzatura,"artless art." That the essay seems artless is one of its great ruses. As content and its highly inventive style, structure, and voice. More often than not, the apparent informality of the essay is the result of great craft and artful than the devices of poetry or fiction. In fact, one of the most interesting conditions of the essay is the tension between its un-invented that awful object, 'the article.' 20 Gass's point is that the essay's dependence on reality doesn't mean that its representational strategies are any less poetic or overtly literary terms (although there is nothing that prevents the essayist from doing so).

As a species of "nonfiction," the essay is engaged with the "real" and is not invented or made up like a poem or story. The essay places ordinary life that was quotidian. There is some truth to that notion. The essay does not usually speak in poetic or overtly literary terms (although there is nothing that prevents the essayist from doing so). The essay is also likely to reveal a coyness about its truth status. If truth exists in an essay, it is a function of individual experience and neglected subjects, an idiosyncratic voice, playfulness, an emphasis on human fallibility, and a willingness to expose one's intellectual insecurities. The essay is also likely to reveal a coyness about its truth status. If truth exists in an essay, it is a function of individual experience and consciousness rather than of any system of thought.

Though still marginalized academically, the essay has benefited from the popularity of literary nonfiction in general, which has thrived since the 1960s, thanks in large part to the appeal of New Journalism, that daring mix of ethnography, investigative reportage, cultural criticism, and fiction that rocked magazine culture during the heyday of radical chic and political activism in America. Today's essayists, who are savvy about the genre's history and formal possibilities, have pushed the envelope of the essay in any number of ways, from forays in prosopetry to experimental writing and the essay film. The essay as currently practiced is a place to act out one's engagement with a world that grows stranger each day. The best essayists do that by returning to the key developments in the essay's history, taking advantage of its subjective, place-oriented way of dramatizing thought. David Foster Wallace offers an especially compelling example of the advantages of mining the essay's past. Not only does Wallace, as essayist, play the participant observer in the tradition of Tom Wolfe, but he also foregrounds his rambling consciousness (sometimes in footnotes and sidewards) in the manner of the familiar essay.

No one would call David Foster Wallace a joyful writer, but the jouissance he lets slip when composing an elaborate footnote in his essays is the joy of digression, a pleasure unique to the essay. 17 Other traits commonly attributed to the genre include spontaneity and intimacy, styliness, the exaltation of the fragmentary, the rejection of deductive logic, whimsicality, the avoidance of erudition, a dislike of dogmatism, an interest in digression, a pleasure unique to the essay. 17 As for the subject matter of the essay, it serves mostly as a pretext for the discussion of topics that tickle the writer's fancy.

Such are the oft-discussed formal properties of the essay. And yet the poeticics of the essay may not at first glance seem obvious. Georg Lukács wrote that the essay was and was not an art form, that it was and was not the soul of criticism. 19 This kind of paradoxical language is typical of efforts to theorize a genre that seems so immune to theory. For Lukács, as for Adorno, the 16 essay's indeterminate state is one of its greatest strengths, because it allows the genre to accomplish its subversive ends. According to formalists such as the New Critics, however, that indeterminacy disqualifies the essay as a literary form. Being neither poetic nor fictive, the language of the essay was in their view not unique or special. It was, in fact, ordinary because its subject matter was quotidian. There is some truth to that notion. The essay does not usually speak in poetic or overtly literary terms (although there is nothing that prevents the essayist from doing so).

As a species of "nonfiction," the essay is engaged with the "real" and is not invented or made up like a poem or story. The essay places ordinary life at the center of its investigations. Anything and everything can be the stuff of the essay. And yet the essay is, as William Gass wrote, "the opposite of that awful object, 'the article.' 20 Gass's point is that the essay's dependence on reality doesn't mean that its representational strategies are any less artful than the devices of poetry or fiction. In fact, one of the most interesting conditions of the essay is the tension between its un-invented content and its highly inventive style, structure, and voice. More often than not, the apparent informality of the essay is the result of great craft and care. Italian writers of the sixteenth century had a word for this: sprezzatura,"artless art." That the essay seems artless is one of its great ruses. As Annie Dillard says, there's nothing you can't do with the essay: "no subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed. You get to make up your
The essay’s poetics is a poetics of ordinary, non-literary language. But its ordinary language isn’t really all that ordinary. It only seems so. In actuality, the language of the essay is carefully shaped and highly crafted. Because the essay has been neglected by critics and scholars for so long, its formal and stylistic strategies—not to mention its history—cry out for attention...

Notes and References
7. As Carl L. Klaus notes, E.B White frankly acknowledged the degree of fabrication behind the construction of his persona: “Writing is a form of imposture: I’m not at all sure I am anything like the person I seem to a reader” (letter, August 15, 1969); quoted by Klaus, The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2010), 2.
10. During his lifetime, between 1597 and 1625, 13 editions of Bacon’s essays appeared (and since then have probably never been out of print). They enjoyed an abiding popularity with Bacon’s contemporaries and grew in number from ten in 1597 to fifty-nine in 1625.
17. Ross Chambers calls the habit of digression a therapy for brooding, a notion that fits well with the history of the essay. See his Loiterature (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1999), 19.

Jeff Porter is the author of Oppenheimer Is Watching Me. His essays have appeared in Antioch Review, Isotope, Northwest Review, Shenandoah, Missouri Review, Hotel Amerika, Wilson Quarterly, Contemporary Literature, Blackbird, and other journals. His film and radio work includes The Men Who Dance the Giglio, Writing on Rock: N. Scott Momaday, Dublin USA, Herby Sings the Blues, and The Angel of History. He is an Associate Professor in English at The University of Iowa, where he specializes in contemporary literature and culture, radio, film and new media studies, and literary nonfiction. His current project focuses on the history and theory of radiophonic literature. With Patricia Foster, he is co-editor of Understanding the Essay, forthcoming from Broadview Press. (from english.uiowa.edu)
Aristotle is one of the greatest figures in the history of Western thought. In terms of the breadth and depth of his thought, together with the quality and... READ MORE HERE. His areas of investigation ranged from biology to ethics and from poetics to the categorization of knowledge. Born in Stagira in northern Greece, with a doctor as a father, he studied under Plato for 20 years until Plato’s death and then left to travel to Asia Minor and then the island of Lesbos. He received a request in about 342 B.C.E. from King Philip of Macedon to supervise the education of his son Alexander, who was 13 at that time. Essay on Poetic Theory, from Poetics. By Aristotle. Aristotle’s ideas about literature have a sense of timelessness about them; reading the Poetics, one recognizes some of the concerns of writers and readers today: what constitutes a good plot, and what makes a character’s actions “necessary” or “probable”? This text has been adapted from S. H. Butcher’s Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art (New York: Macmillan, 1932). Unless otherwise marked, all bracketed insertions are Butcher’s interpolations of missing or Greek text. SECTION 1. Writing sample of essay on a given topic “A Brief History Of English Literature”. The history of English literature is the development of writings and literary techniques used in it over time. English literature is a hundred years old and continues to be the most popular course of study in high schools and institutions of higher learning. English literature is so broad and confusing to many people. English literature includes prose fictions, short stories, drama, novels and poetry among other writings. The old English Literature otherwise known as the Anglo-Saxon was written in between the years 600 and 1100. The language descended from North Germanic tribes who settled in